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LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON AND THE REGIONAL WHOLE

IN THE EARLY NINETEEN THIRTIES, a Scottish novelist wrote a work which literary judgment of the future, as do many of its readers in the present, may estimate as a classic. Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *A Scots Quair*, a trilogy of Scotland's North East, has qualities that make a book immune from the blights of changing taste and let it live. The work could be called regional, if that term is not taken to imply, as it often does, the merely parochial. Grassic Gibbon is regional only in the sense that Hardy is regional. If that implies limitation in one way, it implies also strength in another. The English novel, characterized as it is, in comparison with the novels of other Western literatures, by class-consciousness, is restricted in its appeal to a wider public than a merely national one by its statement of the human dilemma in terms of man's relationship to a particular social structure. The regional novel may escape such restriction of appeal. But in England, because of the class-consciousness that determines English attitudes, the regional is often identified with the provincial. The provincial in the novel, as in English life in general, tends to be left high and dry while main streams flow. Often, too, the regional novel has in fact been provincial in that it treats of those preoccupations with class of the upper reaches of the social order as they are echoed in provincial societies. Man's dilemma as a living being as distinct from a predominantly social being has been the subject of few of the prominent English novels.

From such limitations, in a larger view of the novel, *A Scots Quair* is free. The trilogy reflects, certainly, an aspect of the social structure as it existed in a particular region of Scotland. There is, necessarily, a relationship between crofter and farmer, and crofter and farmer and landowner; between parishioner and minister, between town and country. The relationship is social as well as merely human. The two cannot be wholly separated, because the "human" is to some extent also the social. But the emphasis will make a difference. The novel can treat of man facing problems in living which may arise and be problems because of his consciousness of

himself in a social pattern; or it may present him with this awareness of society set aside, or not existing, living in the face of a larger, less arbitrary destiny. In *A Scots Quair* the emphasis is upon this larger significance rather than the merely social destiny of man.

Man, or rather, woman. For the work, with its high charge of criticism, message, and prophecy born of a social consciousness, holds together in the synthesis of a woman's life. Because we are made to look from a certain woman's angle of vision, the social dilemma, though importantly present in the novel, appears not as absolute but as relative to a greater whole. We are made aware of the eternal values — the things that go on without change though dynasties pass. The book treats of what is basic in life, the near-animal, the elemental — but as they are experienced by the high refinement of an unlettered though not uncultivated woman. It is an experience of developing awareness: the awakening to knowledge of the physical, of the selfishness and cruelty of misguided self-righteousness, of love, of birth and death, of the ceaselessness of change. The dilemma of merely social man is contrasted with, and evaluated by, the predicament of merely living. The demonstration of social awareness, in the form of criticism and prophecy, is an outcome of the idealism; but the critic is augmented and transcended by the poet.

The successive novels of the trilogy create the life-experience of Chris Guthrie, the daughter of a tenant farmer, who grew up, and loved, and married three times; who was widowed by war and premature death, and saw her son grow to young manhood. She watches him suffer for political and social ideals and at last find a measure of peace in love and in hope for a new age. Her story is the matrix of the work. Embedded in it are the realistic portrayal of a people, and the criticism of social ills and existing society. A contrast between the "lyricism" of the woman's vision and the social awareness is also formally maintained. The passages — chapters, and parts of chapters — that tell her story are in a rhythmic prose with strong emotional undercurrents. The alternating passages about the life outside — local and sometimes national, impinging upon Chris's world, affecting it, but never wholly possessing it — are in a sharper, racy language reproducing the speech of the region. The cadenced narrative, shot through with the stiffening realism and stoicism of the heroine's attitudes which prevent it from being merely sentimental, creates her world and her awareness in the light of which the agony of social man is seen and assessed.

Chris's world transcends the social world; but she is not unaware of this outer world of men. Her world is of the land, the fields of Kinraddie, her young first husband, and her child. The war which takes her Ewan away is a baffling mani-

festation of the actions of social man of whom she is a part, evidently, and yet not a part:

Mornings came up, and she saw them come, she minded that morning she'd sent him away and she might not cry him back. Noons with their sun and rain came over the Howe and she saw the cruelty and pain of life as crimson rainbows that spanned the horizons of the wheeling hours. Nights came soft and grey and quiet across Kinradie's fields, they brought neither terror nor hope to her now. Behind the walls of a sanity cold and high, locked in from the lie of life, she would live, from the world that had murdered her man for nothing, for a madman's gibberish heard in the night behind the hills (*Sunset Song*, pp. 132-133).

She is a woman who is cool, self-scrutinizing, critical; agnostic, with the unimpassioned scepticism of the North Eastern Scot, of a "sanity cold and high", though not unfeeling. When, in her second marriage (to a minister of the kirk) social awareness grows upon her, she does not lose detachment and the power to assess the relative value of social enthusiasm. She views, as one apart from the struggle and torment and aspiration of social man, the idealism of her husband Robert — the divine who wrestles to believe what he should believe, and follows a dream of practical love and social reform as means of justifying the ways of a God of whose existence he seeks conviction. In terms of a simple symbolism, she sees in him and in those like him (she will live to see it in her son grown to manhood and into the responsibilities of socially conscious man) the need for an ideal or a dream: "A pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night." She knows that men must have a cloud or a pillar of fire to follow. But she knows too that it is in the nature of cloud and fire to change and pass. She is aware of her own life as both continuity and change. She sees the phase of Segget as a development out of her own past; while experiencing it, she sees beyond it to the unrealized future of herself and her growing son:

Miss Jeannie Grant put her sherry glass down. *I don't see anything your League can do. But the Labour Party can here in Segget, if only we make the branch strong enough;* and she looked as sweet as an apple as she said it, and young and earnest, and Chris half liked her, as though she stood on a hill and looked down on her own youth only beginning to climb, half-liking its confidence, pitying its blindness. But she thought for that matter, again and again (and more than ever since their coming to Segget) that she was older than most she met, older even than Robert himself — older than all but her son Ewan! (*Cloud Howe*, p. 58).

Again a widow, she moves to the Mearns city of Duncairn to be partner to the owner of a small boarding-house and reverts by necessity to a life of physical toil. She has seen her son grow up and away from her own dreams for him: "And Ewan

—what was happening to Ewan? Once so cool and cold boy-clear, boy-clever, a queer lad you'd thought would never be touched by any wing of the fancies of men, grey granite down to the core — and now?" For Ewan too has been touched by the fever of idealistic man to pursue dreams of perfection. Like Robert — in another way, not by concession to a presumably interested God, but by action and conflict— Ewan dedicates himself to the betterment of the underprivileged. This she accepts, because she must. She knows that it is in the nature of men to need pillars of cloud and fire. She recognizes, too, the need for woman (not herself having the same need) to be yet caught up in the strength and inspiration of dreaming, aspiring man. If the ideals are but clouds, yet that need remains:

But there was more to it than that, some never knew it, but real enough, an antrin magic that bound you in one with the mind, not only the body of a man, with his dreams and desires, his loves, even hates — hate of Ewan, a wild boy's hate, passionless coldness of Robert in shadow, they'd given you hate with their love often enough, tears with such white tenderness as even now you might not unfold in memory, — here, at this moment, kneeling here, still, the August sun on your hair, dreaming and dreaming because Ma Cleghorn had blithered on the curse of a woman growing old, because you heard a baby nearby wailing soft in a baby's unease! (*Grey Granite*, p. 43).

And to meet that need, and in weariness, and in tenderness for the man himself, she marries again; this time the man is Ake Ogilvie, a friend from the Segget days.

Through Chris Guthrie's awareness, the novelist has expressed a sense of life as a flux in which man moves to an unknown destiny — not in despair, though with a sense of the sadness of the mystery. Life as an endless cycle of change and repetition marks the past: Scotland's past, and meaningful to her. Suffering and oppression and aspiration are as real for her in the seventeenth-century Covenanters dying for a faith in Dunottar Castle as in the agony of the twentieth-century man in the trenches of Flanders or in the political persecutions of the thirties. For the men in her life, partly because they are men, the present is more of an absolute. She does not lose sight of its relativity. Neither does she lack the sense of the need for day-to-day continuity, the need to move on and forwards with unimpassioned curiosity into the unknown of her own destiny. The sense of what is ultimate being realized from moment to moment in what is present gives the novel its breadth of dimension: the sense of the mystery and complexity of life.

But social man must follow his dreams and struggle for his beliefs. Chris exists in a context of social man. Her vision reduces it to its significance in the light of a greater whole; and the novel, in consequence, has power and validity as a statement about man. Yet as a statement about social man it is also important. Two

results are achieved. The first, and perhaps the more valuable, is the presentation of a people: a section of human society. The second is the criticism of an existing social order and prophecy of a new order. This arises from the needs of a particular time and is the element in the trilogy least acceptable out of its time. But the accompanying expression of the timeless evil of man's oppression by man is valid for all times. The evil is constant; only the proposed cures are variables.

The people thus presented are Scots of the North East: of the shires of Aberdeen and Kincardine, a region spare and hard. They are people who in European countries would be called peasants, although that denomination is not used of Scots; or who, in the language of class hierarchy, would rank as lower middle and working class, although those terms have reference rather to urban society than to workers of the soil. These people of the Mearns are classless, in the sense that people of the land and country dwellers remain always to some extent outside classifications applicable to social, urban man. The folk of the Mearns are realistically created, with their humour, and scepticism, and essential kindness. The humour is of the sort peculiar to this region: half-apologetic for itself, as if the joker were paying forfeit to sense and logic for momentary trifling. Behind the humour, more than partly determining its character, is a satirical approach: the consciousness of aberration from that "sense" by which Scots regulate their attitudes: "Mrs Geddes . . . was so genteel Chris thought it a wonder she should ever open her mouth for food." Sometimes it has a broader, more farcical, earthy quality, reminiscent of Chaucer and Rabelais. Of another unfortunate lady, "Ake Ogilvie had said he would rather sleep with a Highland steer in the lee of a whin." Or it can sharpen to keener satire in the manner of Langland or Lindsay: "For if there's a body on earth that would skin a tink for his sark and preach for a pension in purgatory, it's an Auld Kirk minister."

Another manifestation of the attitudes of this people is the chorus-like comment of the "folk." The technical manipulation of this comment gives the novel its distinctive character. The narrative blends into chorus or commentary expressing North Eastern attitudes, and reproducing the popular speech in its ruthless candour:

For Long Rob had never come back to the Mill. It had fair been a wonder him joining the soldiers and going off to the war the way he did — after swearing black was blue that he'd never fight, that the one was as bad as the other, Scotch or German. Some said it was just plain daft he had gone, with no need for him to enlist; but when Munro . . . told that to Chris Tavendale . . . she said there had been more sweetness and sense in Rob's little finger than in all the Munro carcasses cleeked since the Flood. Ill to say that to a man of an age with your father, it showed you the kind of creature Chris

Tavendale was, folk shook their heads, minding how she'd gone near mad when her man was killed; as if he'd been the only one (*Sunset Song*, p. 137).

It is the representative voice and comment of the people: neighbours, crofters' wives in their gossip, farmers and farm servants exchanging news when they meet in bar or at mart. It is a collective voice, freed from the identities of speakers, but with a sense of identities present. The deflating comment, the disparaging rejection, the scoffing denigration are of the voice of Scotland. They are the marks of an attitude severely critical, dissecting, flaying; but — and the stranger should not be deceived — neither heartless nor indifferent: "Kind, and aye ready to believe the worst of others they heard, unbelieving that others could think the same of themselves." Only nothing is spared in the interests of truth. Good friends as well as mere acquaintances and enemies are subjected to the same searching analysis. There is always, behind the words, the unconscious assumption that the object of criticism is guilty of unwarranted presuming in doing what he does, in being what he is. A native fatalism, older than Calvinism, older than Christianity, judges in others the rashness of self assertion in the face of a jealous destiny.

While the work as a whole does not make its statement through class-conditioned attitudes, yet awareness of class has an important part in it. A conscious aim of the novelist is to express a sense of injustice in the existing social order, and to explore imaginatively the possibility of change to a better order. The solution, it is suggested, may be through what is vaguely called "socialism" or through the incipient communism with which young Ewan associates himself in the last part of the trilogy. Chris and others of her world of the Kinraddie fields are not unconscious of class, although this is something which hardly touches them in their rural isolation. Chris is aware, as something for her traditionally contemptible, of the "gentry." The term as used by her and others refers loosely to those of a class-conscious world beyond their own: the pretentious middle class, "the poverty put-ons of windy Stonehive", as well as the owners of land. When she herself becomes "gentry" by her marriage into the Manse, she is aware enough of class to proclaim her origins and to resist pretentiousness in her new status. Her awareness grows with her marriage to Robert and still more in the last book, because of her son's painful involvement in class war.

By the attitudes of the other characters, expressed in talk and action, and reported through the consciousness of Chris, we are made aware of the social and national problem of poverty and inequality, and the author's concern for a Scotland suffering because her underprivileged people suffer. The feeling is deep. The poet's sensitivity in the novelist gives the work its lyrical beauty when in control.

But it is responsible also for the raw emotionalism and the crudities when overwhelmed by anger at the folly, indifference, and cruelty of social man. The novelist identifies himself with the attitudes of the industrial workers of Duncairn city, and there breaks through passionate feeling about social injustice and the muddle-minded complacency of the bourgeois. The negative spirit of hate and destructive criticism is complemented by the positiveness of prophecy. A work of the depression years of the early thirties, the trilogy expresses a sense of contemporary disillusionment and bitterness and of the need to regain the lost, primitive dignity of man. What is the way? Is it, as Chris's second husband, Robert, preached, dying, in the pulpit of Segget kirk, through a new conception of Christ's message of love and an effective practice of this love?

There is no hope for the world at all . . . except it forget the dream of the Christ, forget the creeds that they forged in His shadow when their primal faith in the God was loosed — and turn and seek with unclouded eyes, not that sad vision that leaves hunger unfed, the wail of children in unending dark, the cry of human flesh eaten by beasts. . . . But a stark, sure creed that will cut like a knife, a surgeon's knife through the doubt and disease — men with unclouded eyes may yet find it, and far off yet in the times to be, on an earth at peace, living and joyous, the Christ come back (*Cloud Howe*, p. 116).

Or is a way through the communism, the keener surgeon's knife than Robert's socialism, taken up "in the times to be" by Chris's Ewan? The novelist explores this possibility; and his statement of the social evils becomes sharper and harsher in *Grey Granite*. Communism is not advanced so much as an absolute good, as a possible way by which aspiring man, the follower of the pillar of cloud, might go. But the reader is allowed to doubt that communism, any more than any other ideal that men may pursue, will be the answer to the mystery of human suffering.

Even here there is no final commitment to one creed which is to be the solution. The angry, prophetic passages are not propagandism merely. The critical attitudes, the scepticism, and the humour of the Scots, present always in the chorus element, objectify to some extent even the passion and the prophecy:

My God, if a lassie couldn't do anything else she could take a bit walk out to Doughty Park, fine there, though the place was littered with Reds, fair daft, the Communionists the worst of the lot, aye holding their meetings and scraiching and bawling that the workers all join up with their unions and fight for their rights and down with the gents.

But no decent lassies would listen to them, for they knew the Communionists were awful tinks who wanted to break up their home (*Grey Granite*, p. 14).

The statement of the social problem is made, but as part of a larger signifi-

cance. It is with a sense of the heroine's attitude that we are left, rather than with any certainty that this one way is *the* way. Chris sees the class war as something beyond the experience of living. Although she understands the wrong, the oppression, the inequality, and is emotionally involved because her son is involved, she has little faith in mere man's power to cure the ill. It is the poet's sense of the mystery of the wrong, realized in the character and attitudes of Chris, which remains the final statement of the work. On the eve of the hunger march of the "Reds" organized by Ewan, there is an interchange between the mother and son at the close of *Grey Granite*:

Chris stirred the fire, looking into it, hearing the Spring wind rising over Duncairn, unending Spring, unending Spring! . . . Rain tomorrow, Ewan said from the window, rotten for the march, but they'd got those boots. Then he came and sat down and looked at her, and asked her, teasing, of what she was dreaming. She said *Of Robert and this faith of yours. 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 a hill* (*Grey Granite*, p. 106).

And alone at last, ending her life in the place where it had begun, her concluding thoughts are these:

And that was the best deliverance of all, as she saw it now, sitting here quiet — that that Change who ruled the earth and the sky and the waters underneath the earth, Change whose face she'd once feared to see, whose right hand was Death and whose left hand Life, might be stayed by none of the dreams of men, love, hate, compassion, anger of pity, gods or devils or wild crying to the sky. He passed and repassed in the ways of the wind, Deliverer, Destroyer and Friend in one (*Grey Granite*, p. 107).

A Scots Quair has a claim to greatness. It is in places overcharged with sentimentality and unrefined emotionalism, and the recurring and too often unvaried pattern of the prose rhythm can sometimes pall. But the book is the work of a developing rather than a developed artist; and his death in his early thirties was untimely.

As a statement about the situation of man both as an individual essence and as a social being, the trilogy's appeal is unrestricted. In English novels about English people, the statement of the human dilemma is often made through the attitudes of persons for whom the problem of living is closely bound up with the reconciliation of self with the demands of class in a predominantly class-conscious society. As the class codes are often peculiarly national, the total statement may seem arbitrary and relative, not absolute. *A Scots Quair* transcends such limitations.