I like his books so much, partly because I think he will show the way to the epic novel again in Sweden. After a rather austere decade, during which fiction had a hard time, I think we are finally back to the novel.

## Modern Scottish Writers

### Ian Campbell

To look at Scottish literature as an isolated phenomenon is not easy: questions arise at once, questions of language and place. Do we mean literature in Lallans (the writer's own, or created as "synthetic" Scots), in English (the language of many Scots, and other writers living in Scotland) or Gaelic? Do we mean the literature of the Lowlands, where the majority of the people of Scotland live, or do we mean the literature produced in the more remote parts of the country where productive and challenging writers of this century have often lived? Do we mean all of these?

A survey of recent Scottish writing by authors of merit does suggest that the writing of merit is done outside the centres of major population. This is not to deny the success of urban novelists such as Moira Burgess, George Friel, Clifford Hanley, Archie Hind, Robin Jenkins, William McIlvanney or Alan Sharp. A random selection, in carefully-chosen alphabetical order to avoid premature judgement by listing, indicates that Glasgow has much to offer today, and to this list could be added figures writing in other media, Stewart Conn, Stephen Mulrine, Edwin Morgan. There are powerful minds at work outside Scotland itself, Duncan Glen supporting the Akros Press in Preston and David Black writing in London.

Yet the attration of the periphery seems strong. Stevenson wrote from Vailima of a Scotland intensely remembered, nostalgically recreated yet never engaged in the sense that he could enter fully into its life. George Douglas-Brown grew up intensely experiencing what he could of life in Ochiltree, Ayr and Glasgow yet found it necessary to escape to an artistic base in Oxford and London to give his vision shape in *The House*

*with the Green Shutters.* Lewis Grassic Gibbon, for all the immediacy of his love of the Mearns, wrote of it from Welwyn Garden City. Edwin Muir, never able fully to escape from the vision of his childhood Eden in Orkney, still found it necessary to travel to England and in Europe, and found his poetic maturity in the journey away from his Eden, and painful retracing of his steps to the partial reunion in *One Foot in Eden.* The Anglo-Scot and the Scot Overseas, often derided as super-patriotic and Burnsomaniac, can make the thoughtful critic pause. Scotland seems to overwhelm writers at close quarters, and a certain distance has frequently been necessary to achieve artistic vision.

The contemporary scene suggests that no great change has taken place in this situation in recent years. True, perhaps one of the most brilliant poetic talents writes from Glasgow, but Edwin Morgan finds travel, and intense commitment to European and Transatlantic literature and criticism, a necessary feature of his poetry. Iain Crichton Smith writes from his base in Oban, George MacKay Brown from the Orkneys. Hugh MacDiarmid himself wrote from distant parts of the country, though often from financial necessity rather than from choice. Like Teufelsdröckh in Carlyle's *Sartor Resartus*, they find isolation gives a clearer perspective. Sorley Maclean until lately wrote decidedly from Plockton, and came to the mainland and to the urban centres rarely and for welcome visits; Neil Gunn found his base in a remote part of the North-East.

Does isolation imply isolationism? Above all, in the far North is the writer cut off from the mainsprings of metropolitan life? At first sight it might well seem so, and since Lewis Grassic Gibbon's mordantly brilliant essay "Literary Lights" in the 1934 volume *Scottish Scene,* produced jointly with Hugh MacDiarmid, there has been widespread critical assumption that the Scottish artist is self-maimed by remote residence, and wilful choice of an archaic language, either by birthright or by conscious re-adoption of Scots in the twentieth-century renaissance. Yet the Northern artist can claim other critical parameters for judgement than mere mileage from London. Commercial development in the last half-decade has in any case made nonsense of the idea that the North is remote. Further, the North may be distant from England but it is close to the Scandinavian

lands which have contributed so richly to the literature, mythology and customs of the Northern counties and islands. Is this remoteness, or enrichment? Even a cursory reading of Edwin Muir's *Autobiography* indicates that to a receptive and sensitive poetic mind, this is enrichment.

This theme I would like to pin down briefly by looking at a single production from the far North. The chosen victim is George MacKay Brown's short story "The Wireless Set" from *A Time to Keep* (1969). It is in no sense totally representative; yet in analysing it we are able to make a point which can be applied more widely.

"The Wireless Set" is about the gift of a set to his mother by an Orkney sailor, home on leave, in the Spring of 1939. The island is aflame with excitement, for no wireless set has penetrated thus far, and all gather in the kitchen to hear the battery set give out its strange medley of news, sadly fallible weather forecast (in an alien accent), commercial exhortation and fragments of an unknown culture. The months pass, and with the outbreak of war Howie, the sailor son, goes off to fight. Old Hugh his father and Betsy his mother work on, their distant way of life hardly affected by the convulsion of Europe. They listen fascinated, as Lord Haw-Haw propagandises the British people. Where is the *Ark Royal,* he mockingly asks after (falsely) announcing its sinking. Prepare for famine, he gloats, as Betsy cooks the communal supper. They pay amused scant attention, perhaps occasionally they break out in anger. They can *see* the *Ark Royal* anchored nearby; the savoury home-produced food is abundant, and belies the threats.

But when the wireless set intrudes on the communal life in a more serious, private way, it ceases to be tolerated. The news comes of Howie's death, sunk by a U-boat. The mother takes the news stoically, the father barely alludes to it. Life will go on, and the missionary is awed and shocked by what he takes to be a callousness with which they respond to the news. He is not of the community; he cannot understand that Betsy's first reaction is to set out drink for the inevitable community wake which follows, not to moan the dead. The community, its inflexible standards and ancient rituals, takes precedence.

The missionary withdraws, defeated. The radio is playing Joe Loss and his orchestra; unprompted, wordlessly, Hughie splinters it with his axe. Howie is avenged. Or is he?

The temptations to ridicule the provincial attitudes of the islanders are almost overwhelming. Yet always the author gives the story a slight edge which destroys the reader's complacency. When "a posh voice came out of the box saying that it would be a fine day to-morrow ... but that in the Highlands and in Orkney and Shetland there would be rain and moderate westerly winds", the situation is so normal that we give it no thought. Yet when at the end of that scene young Howie avers that the wireless speaks *the truth* —— the informed, metropolitan, all-seeing truth, his father replies,

> "Indeed, it doesn't do that. For the man said there would be rain here and a westerly wind. But I assure you it'll be a fine day, and a southerly wind, and if the Lord spares me I'll get the lobsters".

Of course he is right; he and Howie caught twenty lobsters the next day.

Everything in the story undermines the metropolitan authority of the voice from the wireless set. Its voice may be posh, but it is *wrong,* wrong speaking as Lord Haw-Haw, and trivial beside the day-to-day getting on with life of the community. The telegram which announces Howie's death is different. It comes from the greater world, and it has not given the reader any reason for doubting its veracity. Betsy accepts it without question. Yet the truth is accepted only insofar as it has local application.

> "This is bad news indeed (said the missionary). Yet he died for his country. He made the great sacrifice. So that we could all live in peace, you understand."
>
> Betsy shook her head. "That isn't it at all", she said. "Howie's sunk with torpedoes. That's all I know".

In affliction, they close their ranks against the outside world completely. Even the missionary, there to serve them, is excluded by their attitude, and by his unreceptiveness to their grief. He cannot comprehend it, and leaves "awed by such callousness". The wake begins, life goes on, and the last lines of the story are connected with the hens and lobster-creels.

The universals in this story are life and death, suffering, parental affection, loyalty to the community; they are connected with the small outlying Northern community, not at all with the distant metropolitan world which is represented by the wireless set. We can only agree with Old Hugh's verdict in smashing the set; the outside world is as false as it is irrelevant.

In this case, the author has achieved two things by this manipulation of the "provincial" response, on a level which ridicules the use of such an adjective. One is tragic concentration, for the attitudes of the parents are such that they cannot comprehend delicacies and niceties, let alone patriotic abstractions, which might muddy the purpose of this terse, seven-page story. The tragedy of war and bereavement is reduced to the simplest terms, and naturally gains in power. The other achievement is the changing of the audience's attitude to the distant part of Scotland. Although the author never shows his hand, his strict neutrality towards his own characters leaves them open to an attitude of patronising from the audience at the outset.

> "And have you been a good boy all the time you've been away?" said Betsy anxiously. "Have you prayed every night, and not sworn?"

These, like the simple-minded wonder of the folk at the radio, leave the audience feeling secure that they occupy a superior position to these characters. Yet the rapid evolution of the tragedy, and the realisation that from the islanders' point of view they are considerably justified in their attitudes, take away the audience's secure attitude, and leave it with the ambiguity of attitude which very much helps Brown's tragic intention.

"The Wireless Set" is perhaps the most striking of the short stories of this kind in *A Time to Keep,* though the whole collection (not to mention Brown's poetry) shows that the North, remote, half-Scandinavianised, can be a mirror for a distant, impossibly complex urbanised culture in which can perhaps be seen some forgotten or overlooked truth. Attitude-building is easy in a global village, and the periphery of Scotland is far from the main streets of that village. Perhaps this is why in Crichton Smith, Sorley Maclean, George MacKay Brown and other writers in distant parts we get a disturbing

ability to analyse, with ruthless relevance to the distant metropolitan scene, certain features of character and action we call universal. Crichton Smith's disturbing satires of closed minds and religious intolerance, Sorley Maclean's equally disturbing evocations of freedom and patterns of thought stemming from a Gaelic culture alien to most of his readers have the same effect. Scotland may be fragmented to the point where even the definition of "Scottish literature" can (and does) occupy hours of lecture and discussion time in the Universities. Perhaps this short exercise in looking through Northern eyes may suggest that fragmentation is not altogether an evil phenomenon, if by fragmentation we mean the existence of outposts, of cultural areas in which a vision may exist sufficiently strong to be used to turn inwards on Scotland and analyse it with new clarity.

## Per Olof Sundman's Novel *Två Dagar, Två Nätter.*

Irene Scobbie

Per Olof Sundman was born in Vaxholm, near Stockholm, in 1922. His father died in 1924 and his mother then took him to live with his uncle, Olof Rosmark, at Åtvidaberg. Rosmark was very active within the Swedish Co-operative Movement, being connected with Konsum's school "Vår gård" and then going on to build up the Co-operative Movement's retail and distribution of cars and oil on a national scale. This entailed long car journeys into the vast, sparsely populated province of Norrland and Rosmark occasionally took the young Sundman with him. The landscape and the people fascinated Sundman and in the post-war years, when the time came for him to make decisions concerning his future and his career, he chose to move with his wife to north Jämtland where he ran Jormliens Fjällgård, a small guest-house in an isolated part of the country.

Sundman believed in the Co-operative Movement, but he could also see, specially in an isolated part of the country with a small population, how easy it is for over-zealous organisers to deprive the individual of the rights he ought to enjoy in a free