

‘It’s a far cry to the golden age’: First World War and Spiritual Revival in *Sunset Song* and *Highland River*

A significant scene in Lewis Grassie Gibbon’s *Sunset Song* is Will Guthrie’s return on leave from the war to visit his sister, Chris, at Kinraddie. Will had escaped Kinraddie and the dour Calvinist moralism of his father to emigrate to Argentina and marry his sweetheart Mollie. While there, Will joined the French Foreign Legion. Chris asks Will if he and Mollie will one day return home to Scotland, and Will replies: ‘*Havers, who ’d want to come back to this country? It’s dead or its dying—and a damned good job!*’.¹ Chris is angry that her brother feels this way about their country, but her reflections on what Scotland means to her go no further geographically than Kinraddie. Instead, she thinks of the ‘seeds that pushed up their shoots from a thousand earthy mouths’, which confirm to her that ‘Scotland lived, she could never die, the land would outlast them all, their wars and their Argentines’ (SS 216-7). Scotland, to Chris, is the land itself, the natural world that sustains her emotionally and economically. Chris then asks Will if he will come with her the following day to pay their respects at their father’s grave in Kinraddie churchyard. Will asks her mockingly if she has become religious, but she replies seriously:

I don’t believe they were ever religious, the Scots folk, Will—not really religious like Irish or French or all the rest in the history books. They’ve never BELIEVED. It’s just been a place to collect and argue, the kirk, and criticise God. (SS 217)

¹ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, *Sunset Song*, from *A Scots Quair*, ed. and intro. by Tom Crawford (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2008), p. 216 (Dialogue in Gibbon’s novel is always emphasised in the original). Subsequent references will be given in-text as SS followed by page number.

Chris is claiming that the Scots, especially post-Reformation Scots, have never really been Christian. She might be named after the first Christian, but if Chris has a religion at all, it lives in the Land, not with God.

In putting forward this view of Scottish irreligiosity, Chris is acting as her author's mouthpiece. Gibbon fashioned a diffusionist interpretation of world history that regarded religion as one of the unnatural aberrations of civilisation. In 'Religion', an essay from *Scottish Scene*, the 1934 book Gibbon wrote with Hugh MacDiarmid, he puts the case that pre-historical humans were not religious:

Primitives — the food-gatherers, the ancient folk of all the ancient world — knew no religion. Their few and scattered survivors in this and that tiny crinkle of our planet are as happily irreligious as our own remote ancestors. They are without gods or devils, worship or cities, sacrifices or kings, theologies or social classes. Man is naturally irreligious.²

Undaunted by the anthropological speculations in J. G. Frazer's *The Golden Bough* on the religiosity of primitive peoples, Gibbon argues that these were examples of 'savages' infected with the 'disease' of civilisation, and not true primitives still uncontaminated by the spiritual and moral excrescences of modernity.³ In this he is keeping faith with his understanding of diffusionism, which located the source of human cultures as diffusing outwards through migration from one source in the Nile Delta. Previous to the cultivation of human settlements, Gibbon believed that humans lived as free hunter-gatherers, akin to the Rousseau's Natural Man.

² Lewis Grassie Gibbon, 'Religion', in *Smeddum: A Lewis Grassie Gibbon Anthology*, ed. and intro. by Valentina Bold (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), p. 152.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 153.

Critical interest in the sources of religion developed markedly in the period of the late nineteenth, early twentieth century, with influential publications including various works by the Scottish biblical scholar William Robertson Smith, such as *The Religion of the Semites* (1889), Frazer's *The Golden Bough*, first published in 1890, William James's *The Varieties of Religious Experience* (1902), Max Weber's *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* (1905), Émile Durkheim's *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life* (1912), and Sigmund Freud's *Totem and Taboo* (1913) and *The Future of an Illusion* (1927). Modernism has been seen traditionally as a movement of secularisation stemming from multiple complex causal factors. These include Newtonian and Darwinian scientific developments, nineteenth-century philosophical doubt (Strauss's and Renan's demythologising biographies of Jesus; Nietzsche's madman pronouncing God's death), autochthonous challenges to Christian imperialism and the collapse of centralising, divine-right monarchies, the Bolshevik Revolution, as well as rising literacy rates, burgeoning popular culture, and increasing democratisation.⁴ The First World War plays an important but not determining role in this modernist secularisation thesis, which despite catastrophic historical interruptions such as the war, represents history largely as a progressive straight line of western development.

Modernist cultural forms, often resistant to the nightmare of history, reflected these influences and pressures in more nuanced ways, and recent criticism has characterised modernism in terms that are anything but straightforwardly secular. Roger Griffin has argued, for instance, that

⁴ See Stephen Kern, *Modernism After the Death of God: Christianity, Fragmentation, and Unification* (New York and London: Routledge, 2017), pp. 2-3. David Friedrich Strauss, *The Life of Jesus, Critically Examined* (1935), Ernest Renan, *Life of Jesus* (1863). For 'God is dead', see Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Gay Science* (1882), trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York: Vintage, 1974), p. 181.

Modernism is *not* a generalized historical condition [...], but a generalized revolt against even the intuition made possible by a secularizing modernization that we are spiritual orphans in a godless and ultimately meaningless universe. Its hallmark is the bid to find a new home, a new community, and a new source of transcendence.⁵

Griffin's point that modernism is not a securely secular moment, but an attempt to create new forms of home, community, and transcendence out of the ruins of the old is highly pertinent to both Gibbon's *Sunset Song* and Neil M. Gunn's *Highland River*. Gibbon claimed he was irreligious, but his novel sparks with spiritual elements that predate Christian civilisation. This is even more true of *Highland River*, which is a search for spiritual sustenance in a spiritually starved post-war world. Both novels were published in the 1930s, but retain a focus on the First World War: *Sunset Song* (1932) is set in the run-up to the war, and *Highland River* (1937) is set largely after but with sections that take us back to the main character, Kenn Sutherland's, boyhood before he served in the war. War destroys a local culture in *Sunset Song*, and Gibbon's response is to suggest the need for a new, socialist society, especially in the next two novels of the *Scots Quair* trilogy, *Cloud Howe* (1933) and *Grey Granite* (1934). Kenn in *Highland River* goes back to 'the source', and this in part means reacquaintance with his local culture. But it also means finding reconnection after the war with the natural world of his childhood, something we see *Sunset Song*'s Chris enjoying in the mostly pre-war setting of Kinraddie. Associated with this integration with nature, these novels suggest a still possible route back to a Golden Age era of pre-Christian values that can renew and re-enchant Scotland and the modern world.

⁵ Roger Griffin, 'Series Editor's Preface', Erik Tonning, *Modernism and Christianity* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), p. xiii (emphasis in the original).

Modernism's spiritual turn was recognised by Virginia Woolf in 'Modern Fiction', where she contrasts the Edwardian 'materialists' H. G. Wells, Arnold Bennett, and John Galsworthy with the 'spiritual' writing of a modernist such as James Joyce.⁶ Joyce, along with other writers of the modern period, is striving in his work to light up 'that innermost flame' of human character, according to Woolf, as opposed to the descriptive realism of the likes of Bennett, which, with its focus on externals, fails to capture the true life of the human spirit, which Woolf describes memorably as 'a luminous halo'.⁷ Written prior to Woolf's essay, Edwin Muir's *We Moderns* (1918) also attacks Bennett and, under Nietzsche's influence, calls for a 'turn from [...] Realism to Myth'.⁸ For Muir and Woolf, realism is not fit to the task of representing fully the intangible complexities of the human soul. But they also see realism as the cultural form of a corrupt and decadent materialistic society. Woolf recommends that if 'we are sick of our own materialism' then we should turn to the Russian novelists for a deeper understanding of the 'human spirit'.⁹ By this she means that if we have grown tired of realist modes we can seek greater depth elsewhere. More profoundly, Woolf is also saying that our materialist society has made us sick. Before outlining his aesthetic theory of abstract subjectivism, the artist Wassily Kandinsky, in *Über das Geistige in der Kunst* (Concerning the Spiritual in Art, 1911), makes this same point in more dramatic terms: 'The nightmare of materialism, which has turned the life of the universe into an evil, useless game, is not yet past; it holds the awakening soul still in its grip'.¹⁰ The modernist turn inwards required new forms through which to express the spiritual

⁶ Virginia Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', in *Virginia Woolf: Selected Essays*, ed. by David Bradshaw (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 7, 10.

⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 10, 9.

⁸ Edwin Muir, *We Moderns: Enigmas and Guesses* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1920), p. 170.

⁹ Woolf, 'Modern Fiction', *Selected Essays*, pp. 11-12.

¹⁰ Wassily Kandinsky, *Concerning the Spiritual in Art*, trans. by M. T. H. Sadler (New York: Dover, 1977), p. 2.

life. It was, at the same time, critical of a culture that culminated in the ultimate ‘nightmare of materialism’, the First World War.

Modernism was, amongst other things, a bid to reenchant a disenchanted post-war world. Part of this involved interest in an eclectic mix of esoteric spiritualism and traditional religious ideas. The mystical revival of the 1890s was a significant influence here and would galvanise the polytheistic MacGregor Mathers’s Golden Dawn and the Yeatsian Irish Revival, for instance. A spiritual foundation would be especially important to small-nation revival movements. As Simon Critchley comments, ‘modern forms of politics [...] have to be grasped as new articulations and mutations of the sacred’.¹¹ Politics is inconceivable without a form of grounding belief, or what Critchley calls, after the Romans, ‘*theologica civilis*, civil theology’.¹² What is key here for Critchley is that, while we may seem ‘in the West’ or ‘western Europe’ to inhabit a secular era, nonetheless,

The *secularization* that seems to define modern politics has to acknowledge a moment of what Emilio Gentile calls *sacralization*, the transformation of a political entity like a state, nation, class or party into a sacred entity, which means that it becomes transcendent, unchallengeable, and intangible.¹³

Gentile, in *Politics as Religion*, acknowledges that fascism was ‘the first nationalist totalitarian movement that fully displayed the characteristics of a political religion’, but claims that liberal

¹¹ Simon Critchley, *The Faith of the Faithless: Experiments in Political Theology* (London and New York: Verso, 2014), p. 25.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 24.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 24 (emphasis in original).

democracy is also based fundamentally in the sacralising of politics.¹⁴ In the case of small-nation modern renaissances, sacralisation was a bid to lift national revival out of the compromises and divisions of politics and into an originary realm that awaits rediscovery or rebirth. This can result in what Fredric Jameson has called ‘anti-modern modernisms’, frequently ‘pastoral visions’, such as the Celtic Twilight, which are ‘anti-positivist, spiritualistic, irrational reactions against triumphant enlightenment progress or reason’.¹⁵ However, Jameson neglects to mention that Enlightenment improvement was often advanced under the guise of imperialism, which the symbolical, ostensibly irrational, coding of small-nation revival movements stood against. *Their* conception of history frequently refused the straight line of Christian imperial progress, and in this can be seen forms of nationalist resistance to metropolitan universalism.

What Jameson characterises as ‘anti-modern modernisms’, I would rather call pagan modernisms. Such a term fits both *Sunset Song* and *Highland River*, as well as aspects of other non-metropolitan post-war revival modernisms. Owen Davies tells us that the Latin root of pagan, *paganus*, relates to ‘rustic’ and ‘of the countryside’.¹⁶ Pagan has often been translated into English as ‘peasant’, and also had connotations of local and rooted non-Christian ‘country folk’, in opposition to Hellene and Roman cosmopolites.¹⁷ Later, pagan became a synonym for anticlericalism, as well as anti-Catholicism. *Highland River* and *Sunset Song* are rural, regional novels concerned with the folk. There is, at best, ambivalence towards Christianity in *Highland River*. The narrator observes that Kenn’s parents did not take communion because they felt

¹⁴ Emilio Gentile, *Politics as Religion*, trans. by George Staunton (Princeton and Oxford: Princeton University Press, 2006 [first published in Italian, 2001]), pp. xvii.

¹⁵ Fredric Jameson, *Postmodernism, or, The Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* (London and New York: Verso, 1993), p. 304.

¹⁶ Owen Davies, *Paganism: A Very Short Introduction* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 2.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*

themselves ‘unworthy’, yet Kenn’s mother possessed a ‘humility’ comparable to Christ’s.¹⁸ Kenn complains that in school they had been taught nothing of pre-Christian history, even though Druidic sacrifices may have taken place locally (*HR* 120). *Sunset Song* is fiercely anti-Christian. Ministers are corrupt and licentious, and Calvinist sex repression has soured John Guthrie’s character. The schoolgirl Chris, bored by Sir Thomas Browne’s Christian confessional *Religio Medici*, lent to her by the minister, finds greater fun in washing bedsheets with her mother. Jean Guthrie’s joyful exclamation on seeing her daughter in her underwear, ‘*God, you’ve stripped!*’ (*SS* 59), contains no hint of blasphemy, in contrast to John Guthrie’s embarrassment and stifled lust, which shames Chris’s naturalness. Both novels speculate that the First World War, what Gunn calls ‘the great Poison War’ (*HR* 120), is the culmination of the Christian era, and they also imply that revival will be brought about by rediscovering pre-Christian folk values with a pagan edge.

Two pagan characteristics are ‘deification of nature’ and ‘veneration of ancestors’.¹⁹ Nature, and closeness to a natural state, are important in these novels. This often combines with feelings of connection to primitive folk. Chris finds solace in the enduring land and her retreats to the Standing Stones, but the pagan stones illicit a ‘shiver’ from the Christian Guthrie, who says they were ‘raised’ by ‘skin-clad savages’ (*SS* 41). Chae Strachan, back on leave from the war, envisions an ancient man at the Standing Stones (*SS* 207), and Chae’s name will later be inscribed on one of the stones on its transformation into a war memorial. The Standing Stones provide Chris with a perspective on all history and time within which the Christian civilisation terminating in the First World War is merely a passing cloud. To create ‘a newer world’ out of

¹⁸ Neil M. Gunn, *Highland River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1991), p. 93. Subsequent references will be given in-text as *HR* followed by page number.

¹⁹ Davies, *Paganism*, p. 13.

the war carnage means adapting the communal folk values of Kinraddie's dead peasant farmers (SS 256). Kenn, called by Gunn's biographers an 'ascetic pagan', finds freedom from school in sky and river, and when hunting his salmon he is in opposition to civilisation and its gatekeepers.²⁰ Joining-up at eighteen, he is blinded by gas at the Somme, and like Ewan in *Sunset Song*, he runs away from the frontline. Kenn is invalided to Leicester, a city that embodies the empirical disciple of school, a foreign history, war, industry, and Britain. Kenn loses his sight in war in order to regain a primal and local, Celtic-pagan vision in peace. *Highland River* is novel of sensing and being – as in Nan Shepherd's *The Living Mountain* (1977), these two qualities are bound together. Kenn understands that the 'adventures of boyhood were adventures towards the source' of himself and his local culture (HR 55). Just as the natural magic of boyhood is needed to revive the man, so magic is also needed to restore the post-war nation and world. In searching for 'the hazel nuts of knowledge and the salmon of wisdom' (HR 139), Kenn's story becomes a modern version of Fionn's from the Celtic Fenian Cycle in which Fionn gained all the world's knowledge by eating the salmon. The adult Kenn comes back to the river, and the smell of 'heath fire and the primrose' (HR 110), to experience the sureness that there was once a golden age, which belief equates also to a belief in the folk. Gunn wrote that he would 'like to create a philosophy (appalling word) of sorts' with *Highland River*,²¹ and critics have been led by Gunn's *The Atom of Delight* (1956) to find Zen in Gunn's works.²² However, 'the truth of life to Kenn was that at its core there was a wise pagan laughter' (HR 218), which he relates to the Celtic myth of the serpent that swallows its tail, also utilised by Hugh MacDiarmid in *To Circumjack Cencrastus* (1930).

²⁰ F. R. Hart and J. B. Pick, *Neil M. Gunn: A Highland Life* (London: John Murray, 1981), p. 22.

²¹ Letter to Frank Morley, quoted in Hart and Pick, *Neil M. Gunn*, p. 138.

²² See, for instance, John Burns, *A Celebration of the Light: Zen in the Novels of Neil Gunn* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1988).

MacDiarmid objected from his Marxist perspective to what he described as the ‘very general sentimentality’ of *Highland River*.²³ Gibbon, also a radical, admired *Butcher’s Broom* (1934) and commissioned Gunn to write *Whisky and Scotland* (1935) for Routledge & Kegan Paul’s ‘Voice of Scotland’ series, yet called Gunn ‘the greatest loss to itself Scottish literature has suffered in this century’ through Gunn’s choice to write in English.²⁴ While the novelists shared similar fantasies of a Golden Age, these came from unrelated political and philosophical roots: Gibbon’s stimulus lay in diffusionism and a belief in radical freedom, whereas Gunn was influenced by the work of Irish nationalist Patrick Pearse. Gunn wrote articles on Pearse for the *Scots Independent* in 1929–30, excited by the ‘delight’ and ‘native joyousness’ Pearse found in the Gael; such a tradition, for Gunn, is ‘not merely worth writing about, but living for and dying for’.²⁵ Violence and the sacred combine in Pearse’s synthesis of the pagan Cúchulainn myth with Christian Catholicism to inspire the Easter Rising. Gunn’s *Sun Circle* (1933), with its Druid Master and battle between paganism and Christianity, echoes Pearse’s play *The Master* (first performed 1915). In Gunn there is, as Hart and Pick point out, a ‘vision of childhood as an archaic link with a golden age’.²⁶ Gunn admired Pearse’s preoccupation with childhood innocence, which Pearse also used to instigate national revival, but which most likely stemmed from Pearse’s repressed paedophilia.

The ‘Northern paganism’ of Gunn’s work in this period, also found in Gibbon’s Chris Guthrie’s relation to the land and history, can be seen too in J. D. Fergusson’s candid (for the period) paintings of female nudes, combining Celtic mythology, bright colour palettes and

²³ Letter to Neil M. Gunn, 1 December 1937, in *The Letters of Hugh MacDiarmid*, ed. by Alan Bold (London: Hamish Hamilton, 1984), p. 261.

²⁴ Gibbon, ‘Literary Lights’, in *Smeddum*, p. 130.

²⁵ ‘Dane McNeil’, *Scots Independent*, date?, quoted in Hart and Pick, *Neil M. Gunn*, p. 95.

²⁶ Hart and Pick, *Neil M. Gunn*, p. 96.

freedom from what Fergusson regarded as Calvinist ‘destructiveness’.²⁷ These artists of the Scottish revival located in the pagan past a Golden Age which, in the disenchantment following the First World War, inspired a national renaissance.

²⁷ ‘Northern paganism’ is Frank Kendon’s phrase, quoted in Hart and Pick, *Neil M. Gunn*, p. 102. J. D. Fergusson, *Modern Scottish Painting*, ed. by Alexander Moffat and Alan Riach (Edinburgh: Luath Press, 2015), p. 142. (First published in 1943 by William MacLellan, Glasgow.)