



HÁSKÓLI ÍSLANDS

Hugvísindasvið

**The Influence of History, Legend and
Language on Scottish Identity in Neil M.
Gunn's *The Silver Darlings* and Lewis
Grassic Gibbon's *Sunset Song***

Ritgerð til B.A.-prófs

Harpa Sif Haraldsdóttir

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Abstract

Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon were important figures within the Scottish Literary Renaissance and are considered to be the most influential Scottish writers of the early twentieth century. In their works, they deal with many of the themes of the Scottish Renaissance such as the importance of history and legend and language in the search for identity.

Neil M. Gunn was born in 1891 in the Scottish Highlands and throughout his life he fought for the preservation of the traditional Highland life. His novel *The Silver Darlings*, published in 1941, deals with the life and community of herring fishers on the Scottish Highland coast in the early nineteenth century, but it is also a heroic tale that follows the story of Catrine and her son Finn's journey from childhood to manhood. In *The Silver Darlings*, Gunn presents many contrasts, such as land and sea, man and woman, history and legend, but in the end he creates harmony between these contrasts and as a result his characters find their own identity.

Lewis Grassie Gibbon similarly deals with the search for identity in his novel *Sunset Song*, published in 1932. Gibbon, the son of hard-working farmers, was born in 1901 in Aberdeenshire. He had very mixed feelings towards his birthplace, feelings which are mirrored in *Sunset Song*'s main character Chris Guthrie. The novel is about a farming community in Northeast Scotland at the beginning of the twentieth century and it follows Chris Guthrie from childhood to womanhood. *Sunset Song* focuses on Chris' struggle to identify herself as Scottish or English and Gibbon uses language to portray the difference between Scottish Chris and English Chris.

Although *Sunset Song* and *The Silver Darlings* have many similar characteristics, they differ in spirit which can be explained by the authors' different experiences and attitudes towards their native land.

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Introduction

We all strive to identify ourselves with something so we feel that we belong to some greater purpose. Most people identify themselves with their place of birth and its history, religious and political beliefs, gender or even social status. Therefore, there are many aspects that influence how a person perceives himself and the world around him. As a result, the theme of finding one's identity has been a very popular subject for authors, artists and musicians, especially in the twentieth century. Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon (James Leslie Mitchell) are considered to be the most influential Scottish writers of the early twentieth century. They were both important figures within the Scottish Literary Renaissance and incorporated many aspects of the ideology of the Renaissance into their works. Gunn's *The Silver Darlings* and Gibbon's *Sunset Song* have many similarities and the authors seem to use similar methods. However, the novels differ in spirit and the authors were considered to represent different perspectives of the Renaissance writers (Gifford 147). Nevertheless, despite their different perspectives, Neil M. Gunn and Lewis Grassie Gibbon both used Scottish history, legend and language – according to the ideology of the Scottish Renaissance – to discover their roots and to create their own Scottish identity in their novels *The Silver Darlings* and *Sunset Song*.

1. The Scottish Renaissance

The Scottish Renaissance was a literary movement of the early and mid twentieth century. According to Margery Palmer McCulloch it was “a Scottish modernism deriving from the periphery of a peripheral small country, as opposed to the high modernism of European cosmopolitan metropolis” (“Scottish Modernism” 14). It was an answer to the previous kailyard movement which was thought to portray life in the Scottish countryside in an unrealistic positive manner and disregard all real life issues. Douglas Gifford regards the Scottish Renaissance as “the richest period of all Scots literature” with its “rich variety of genres in Scots and English” (Gifford 9). It is said to have begun with the launch of an “ambitious programme for cultural and national renewal” by Christopher Murray Grieve, later known as Hugh MacDiarmid (“Scottish Modernism” 14). According to McCulloch, Grieve realised that in order for this renewal movement to endure, there had to be some kind of forum where ideas for new creative writing were presented and forward-looking literary and national ideas debated (“Scottish Modernism” 15). As a result he launched *The Scottish Chapbook* in August 1922 which soon became a platform for “propaganda of ideas” (“Scottish Modernism” 16). It further encouraged and published the works of contemporary Scottish poets and dramatists, whether they wrote in English, Braid Scots or Gaelic (“Scottish Modernism” 16). In fact, as McCulloch suggests, Grieve celebrated the language diversity in Scotland and encouraged writers to write in Scotland’s indigenous languages (“Scottish Modernism” 17). For him, the Scots language was the cornerstone of the movement “and at the same time the marker of revitalised Scottish identity distinctive from English; it had become the signifier and the symbol of both aesthetic and political objectives of the revival movement” (“Scottish Modernism” 19). MacDiarmid was likewise a founding member of the Scottish Nationalist Party (Campbell 49).

The ideology of the Scottish Renaissance movement entailed both the idea of preserving the past and embracing the future. The writers of the movement were interested in modern technology and philosophy but simultaneously they respected legends and rituals and very often incorporated folklore and myths in their works (Gifford 3). They believed that they played an important role in building a new future and creating new perspectives towards Scottish culture and languages; for they believed, as McCulloch points out, that “revolution in art was the prelude to revolution in the organisation of society” (“Scottish Modernism” 93). Because of the increasingly depressed economic and social condition during the Great Depression in Scotland, people were more open to the ideological creative writing of the Scottish Renaissance writers (“Scottish Modernism” 94). But with the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939 the movement came to an end which, according to McCulloch, was “a convenient but unsatisfactory closure since it robs the movement of its last words” (“Scottish Modernism” 198). Consequently, McCulloch claims, Scottish culture in the 1940s and 50s appears stranded “in a kind of no-man’s land... waiting to be rescued by the new demotic and largely urban writing which, together with the popular culture of the 1960s generation, will take it on a different journey” (“Scottish Modernism” 198).

2. Neil M. Gunn and *The Silver Darlings*

Neil M. Gunn was among the earliest supporters of the Scottish Renaissance movement (McCulloch, “Scottish Modernism” 25). He was born in 1891 in Dunbeath on the northeast coast of Caithness. Dunbeath was a small fishing and crofting community and Gunn’s father was a successful herring boat skipper. According to Gifford, Gunn grew up in a loving family and he both loved and respected his parents and his community. His early experience of work on both land and sea, depending on the different seasons of the year, taught him the importance of balance and harmony in life (Gifford 12). This experience had deep influence

on his writing and the theme of creating harmony is a recurring one in his novels. Gunn was furthermore deeply rooted in his “beloved Highlands” where he found inspiration for his writing and from early on he became passionate about preserving the traditional Highland life (Gifford 12). He began his literary career as a journalist and according to McCulloch wrote numerous articles arguing the case of the “authentic Highland experience and for the political control necessary to keep that way of life alive” (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 2). He sympathised with the Scottish Renaissance cause and supported Hugh MacDiarmid’s literary and political aims, although Gunn himself wrote in English and was neither Scots nor Gaelic speaking (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 1). MacDiarmid was impressed with Gunn’s first novel *The Grey Coast*, published in 1926, and regarded him as “the only Scottish prose-writer of promise... in relation to that which is distinctively Scottish rather than tributary to the ‘vast engulfing sea’ of English literature” (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 1). In his novels, Gunn focused on the history and the traditional life of the Scottish Highland communities, and as McCulloch suggests, the folk culture of the Highlands was his literary heritage (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 3). Having lived almost his entire life in the Highlands, Gunn died in 1973, leaving behind him twenty novels, four volumes of essays, two books of short stories and an autobiography, all published between 1926 and 1956 (Gifford 49).

The Silver Darlings was published in 1941 and is the final novel in Gunn’s trilogy of the history of the Highlands, the others being *Sun Circle* (published in 1933) and *Butcher’s Broom* (published in 1934). Gunn dedicated *The Silver Darlings* to his father as it deals with the life and the community of herring fishers in Moray Firth on the Scottish Highland coast and is set in the early nineteenth century. The novel also deals with the aftermath of the Highland Clearances and evictions in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which forced the people to move from the inland to the Highland coast. Furthermore, *The Silver Darlings* is a

heroic tale that follows the story of Catrine and her son Finn's development from childhood to manhood.

2.1 History and legend in *The Silver Darlings*

The Silver Darlings is the result of extensive preliminary research of the history of the Moray Firth and in McCulloch's view, one of the novel's principle strengths "is the historical authenticity of the portrait painted" (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 85). McCulloch mentions that in his article "The Novel at Home" Gunn tells how one American critic observed that *The Silver Darlings* seems to have been "written by one who lived in kinship with the matter of his writing" (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 86). Gunn responded to this observation by claiming that the authenticity and "kinship" did not merely come from knowing all the historical facts. More importantly, it came from the author's attitude towards those facts (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 86). As previously mentioned, Gunn was deeply rooted in his Highland heritage and he wanted to take into account all the various material of which his roots were composed, be it facts, records, fables, myths or legends (Murray and Tait 34).

Gunn's investigation of his own roots is in a way mirrored in *The Silver Darlings*, which has an interesting mixture of historical facts and folk legends (in tune with the ideology of the Scottish Renaissance). The setting of the novel is historical and Gunn's portrayal of the people is realistic, but the element of myth is very present throughout the novel. This mythical element is most notably apparent in the legendary qualities Gunn attributes to his main characters, making them simultaneously a symbol and a living character (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 88).

Gunn gives Finn many of the qualities of the Celtic hero Finn MacCoul. They share a name and they are both hunters and great storytellers. As McCulloch points out, Gunn directly links Finn with his legendary counterpart on three separate occasions (*The Novels of Neil M.*

Gunn 87). The first link takes place in Dale when Finn tells of his adventures after his first epic journey to Stornoway and an old drover says to him afterwards: “You gave me a vision – of the youth of Finn MacCoul himself” (*Gunn* 449). Later, that same drover asks: “Are the days of Finn MacCoul coming back upon us?” (*Gunn* 479). The final link takes place at North Uist when the old storyteller with whom Finn stays “initiates him into the traditions and knowledge of the community as if he were passing the mantle of his wisdom to Finn” (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 88). The old storyteller’s name was also Finn, “which was likewise Finn MacCoul’s, the great hero of the noble Fians, whose marvellous exploits were this storyteller’s province in learning and in art” (*Gunn* 538).

Another clear reference to Finn MacCoul takes place when Finn watches Roddie catch the salmon in the chapter “The Coming of the Plague”. According to legend, Finn MacCoul watched his patron catch the salmon of knowledge and as he was cooking the salmon, MacCoul burned his thumb. Instinctively, he put his thumb in his mouth and by doing so he got some of the salmon skin in his mouth. Consequently, MacCoul acquired the salmon’s knowledge (Osborne and Howell 2-3). Interestingly, it is only after Roddie catches the salmon that Finn learns, or “acquires knowledge”, about Kirsty’s illness and decides to embark on his first heroic journey. McCulloch suggests that Gunn’s intention is to make the reader see Finn both as a figure of legend and as a representative of a new generation (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 87).

Like Finn, the character of Roddie is part symbol and part living character. He symbolises the new beginning and the commitment to the sea (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 88). By referring to Roddie as Viking and giving him many Viking-like qualities, Gunn is successful in merging together the symbol and the living character. In contrast, Catrine represents the people of the land and their fear of the sea (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 88). Gunn portrays Catrine and Roddie as binary opposites, man/woman, sea/land but in the end,

with their marriage, they erase the hyphen and create a harmonious balance between life on land and sea.

Gunn's mixture of the historical and the legendary is not only seen in his portrayal of the main characters but also in the events of the story. The historical events are the result of Gunn's intense research for the novel and include the beginning of the herring fisheries in Moray Firth and the cholera outbreak which encourages Finn to go on his first dangerous journey. These historical events help the reader to understand the situation of the Highland people at the beginning of the nineteenth century and give the novel a realistic air, which makes it a kind of "social document" for this period as McCulloch suggests (*The Novels of Neil M. Gunn* 86).

The legendary events of the novel are mostly connected to Finn and his epic sea voyages and his heroic deeds, such as his journey to Wick to find the doctor for Kirsty and his climbing the cliffs of the Seven Hunters to find food and water for his shipmates. Gunn explains Finn's heroic abilities in these situations by linking him with Finn MacCoul, as previously mentioned. While climbing the cliffs of the Seven Hunters, Finn laughs and waves to his shipmates "like an immortal youth" and goes "up the steep rock with ease" (Gunn 316), which gives the reader the impression of fearlessness and heroic ability more fitting to a legendary hero than an ordinary young man.

At the Seven Hunters, Finn sees a small house and in it there is "a damp smell of the earth or of something very ancient" and although nobody is there Finn feels "that he [is] not alone" (Gunn 317). Finn seems to have the ability of "second sight", which Marian F. McNeill defines as the ability to glimpse into "the invisible world" (McNeill 104). Catrine has this second sight as well and she seems to dream of events to come. Before Tormad goes to sea, Catrine dreams of a black horse, which turns out to be a water kelpie, jumping into a loch with Tormad on its back. The dream introduces Catrine's gift of foresight as it clearly

foreshadows Tormad's disappearance. These kinds of supernatural events involving second sight and foreshadowing dreams are quite common in *The Silver Darlings*. Both the legendary and the supernatural events give the novel an epic nature and by weaving the historical events carefully together with the legendary and the supernatural, Gunn successfully creates a balance between history and legend in *The Silver Darlings*, thus creating a realistic legendary historical novel.

2.2 Identity and language in *The Silver Darlings*

Gunn recognised the importance of language in creating a nation's identity. However, as McCulloch mentions in her 1992 lecture "The Novels of Neil M. Gunn", Gunn believed nonetheless that identity "goes beyond language" and that heritage and cultural traditions are equally important to a nation's identity. In *The Silver Darlings*, Gunn addresses the matter of Scotland's mixed ancestry. Furthermore, he attempts to create a balance between the ancient tribes of Scotland by bringing them together in harmony. Gunn's family was of Nordic and Celtic descent and in *The Silver Darlings* he celebrates the mixed ancestry of the Scottish people by attributing characteristics of different tribes to his main characters, Tormad, Roddie and Catrine.

Tormad, who disappears at the beginning of the novel, represents the lost tribe of the Picts. They were deeply rooted in the land and Gunn expresses this rootedness in that "Tormad's heels sank into the earth" (Gunn 13). He "[is] a heavy broad fellow, a little above the average in height" (Gunn 13). He has black hair and very dark blue eyes "and [has] an expression in them exasperated and sad" (Gunn 13). Tormad is the opposite of Roddie, who not only symbolises the commitment to the sea as previously mentioned but also represents the Vikings, the people of the sea. He is presented as tall, with "reddish-fair hair" and having "explosive strength" (Gunn 281; 62). He is a "daring and preserving seaman" who most of the

time is “mild-mannered and pleasant and very obliging” (Gunn 78-79). He claims himself married to the sea and the people talk about him as “one of the old Vikings” (Gunn 281).

Catrine can be seen as representing the Celtic tribe as she seems to possess some Celtic qualities like second sight, which is important in Celtic folklore. She foresees Tormad’s disappearance in her dream with the water kelpie, which is a supernatural water spirit from Celtic folklore. Catrine is strong and her ability to adapt to new situations and surroundings enables her to survive. Gunn uses Finn, who is an aspiring seaman (like a Viking), but the son of a Pict and a Celt, to create peace and harmony between these tribes. Isobel Murray and Bob Tait argue that “Finn brings Viking and Celt, pagan and Christian, old world and new world together” (Murray and Tait 49).

As Gunn celebrates the mixed ancestry of the Scottish people, he introduces a certain struggle of identity – the struggle to identify oneself with the land or the sea or with Celtic or Viking ancestry. This struggle is mainly seen in Finn. He is the son of Catrine the Celt and Tormad the Pict – people of the land – but he grows up admiring Roddie the Viking and wanting to go to sea. However, Gunn does not force his character to choose one over the other. His solution is making Finn’s journey to manhood and maturity represent the process of creating balance between Celts and Vikings and land and sea.

On his journey to manhood, Finn experiences complicated feelings towards his mother and Roddie. When he was a boy, Finn looked up to Roddie, but as he grows older and recognises the feelings between his mother and Roddie, Finn starts regarding Roddie as a rival for his mother’s love. He also grows angry with his mother and it is not until he has reached enough maturity that he is able to sort out his emotions and reconcile with them both. Finn is able to reconcile with Roddie when they are working together to save Duncan and Finn experiences “comradeship that lies beyond all the trials of the world” (Gunn 513). Finn reconciles with his mother and gives his blessing to her relationship with Roddie by giving his

new baby brother a gift (Gunn 562). At the end of the novel, Gunn creates a harmony between land and sea by presenting Finn as the proud owner of Kirsty's croft as well as a successful boat skipper, and "his heart was singing, because his heart had fallen in love with his boat and his croft and – and everything" (Gunn 572).

Gunn uses language as well to portray the difference between the ancient tribes and their relationship to land and sea. According to Gifford, Gunn makes Tormad and his fellow inexperienced fishermen (the Picts) describe the sea in land terms (Gifford 119). When they are heading out for the first time, they touch the boat "as it was a strange horse" and after an awkward start they look back to the shore and "[t]he folk were like small animals, like little dark calves" (Gunn 15; 17). The scene continues:

They changed places in the boat so warily that she scarcely rocked... Not until that moment did they fully realise that they were by themselves, cut off, on the breast of the ocean. They had never before been so far from land, and the slow movement of the sea became a living motion under them. It brimmed up against the boat and choked its own mouth, then moved away, without end, slow, heedless, and terrible, its power restrained, like the power in some great invisible bull. Fear, feather light, kept them wary, like the expectancy of a blow in a dark place (Gunn 17).

Gifford suggests that the rhythms of the sentences in the paragraph above seem to capture the rhythm of the sea (Gifford 120). The inexperienced fishermen experience the power of the sea as a "great invisible bull", a clear land image that suggests their minds are filled with land memories (Gifford 120). Gifford further points out that Gunn applies the land-sea contrast to the smallest detail: "The tackle consisted of a short cross-spar of slim hazel with the line tied to the middle of it and a hook on a short horse-hair snood dangling from each end" (Gunn 18).

In general, Gunn's language in *The Silver Darlings* is very descriptive and detailed. He not only manages to capture the rhythms of the sea like in the quote above, but it seems like his writing mirrors the rhythms of each situation. When Finn is climbing the rock of the Seven Hunters, the reader gets a vivid description of the process and the rhythm of the language makes the reader really experience Finn climbing the rock:

His toe came up searching for a purchase, found it, felt all round it, gripped; his right hand moved up and got hold he could have swung on; his left hand, his left foot; slowly, with a certainty of care; up, up over, until he lay on his stomach in safety, with a laughing ecstasy in his heart (Gunn 316).

Gunn manages to get the reader so caught up in the action that he cannot but sigh with relief when Finn has finally reached safety.

Gunn wrote *The Silver Darlings* in English, as he was neither a Scots nor a Gaelic speaker. However, it is implied that his characters speak to each other in Gaelic and that English was a second language to them. This is most noticeable in the chapter "Finn's Journey for a Doctor" when, as the chapter heading implies, Finn travels to find a doctor after he learns that Kirsty has the plague. Arriving in Wick, he comments that he hears the people talk to each other in English but "[h]e could not understand them, though he knew a word here and there" (Gunn 247). He also gets nervous about not being able to speak to the doctor and he starts practicing to himself on the way, trying to remember all his English lessons. When he reaches Wick he asks an old man "in his best English" for the doctor's house, but the old man asks him in return: "Have you no Gaelic?" (Gunn 248). Finn struggles with this foreign language and his dialogue with the girl at the doctor's house is quite amusing. After Finn asks for the doctor, the girl replies: "He's expeckit back in an 'oor's time." Clearly not understanding her, Finn asks: "When will he be home?" and at the same time "realizing that his English was fabulous" (Gunn 249). This play on the language goes on throughout the

chapter, giving the reader the impression of a language barrier, when in fact there is none, as the only language in the novel is English.

3. Lewis Grassie Gibbon

In order to understand *Sunset Song* and especially the main character Chris Guthrie, it is important to understand Gibbon's own character and his complex perspective of his native land. Gibbon was born James Leslie Mitchell in 1901 in Hillhead of Segget, Auchterless, Aberdeenshire, the youngest of eight children of hard-working farmers (Gifford 43). The life on the farm was repetitive and hard and there was no time for holidays or fun. His father pushed himself hard and expected his family to do the same, but Gibbon hated the work and did his best to escape by turning to books (Campbell 2). Ian Campbell argues that Gibbon's adolescence "can be comprehended in terms of a convulsive rejection of this life" (Campbell 3). He was perceived by his school peers as aloof and withdrawn, choosing books over boys' sports (Campbell 3).

Gibbon's upbringing in the rich farming land of Scotland's northeast coast had an important influence on his career as a writer. From early on, Gibbon had mixed feelings towards his birthplace, his parents and the hard labour of the farming life. On the one hand he loved the land and had sympathy with his hard-working father but on the other hand he hated the dirt, the hard labour and his father's authoritarian and unsympathetic character (Gifford 43). However, as Gifford points out, "Gibbon was always proud of having been born a peasant even although much of his work deplores the narrowness of the crofting people" (Gifford 43). This duality and these mixed (and sometimes, as it seems, confusing) emotions towards his native land and its people are very present in Gibbon's *Sunset Song* and will be discussed later.

Gibbon started his career as a journalist and soon began to identify himself with the Scottish Renaissance. He assumed the pseudonym Lewis Grassie Gibbon, which was without a doubt inspired by his mother's name, Lillias Grassie Gibbon (Campbell 1). He worked on a collection of short stories and essays with Hugh MacDiarmid called *Scottish Scene*, but unlike MacDiarmid, Campbell argues, Gibbon found himself "torn between the desire to maintain distinctive Scottishness in life and literature, and an inability to subscribe to the political manifestations of Scottish nationalism" (Campbell 49). Therefore, Gibbon had mixed feelings towards Scottishness as well. According to Campbell, Gibbon abhorred "Scottish history, Scottish literature and culture in its popular forms" but at the same time he enjoyed the company of some Scottish writers like Hugh MacDiarmid and Neil M. Gunn (Campbell 47). Unlike Gunn, who lived most of his life in his native Scottish Highlands, Gibbon moved to England and lived in Welwyn Garden City for the rest of his life.

Sunset Song was published in 1932 and, according to Campbell, received mixed response but turned out to be a long term success (Campbell 7). This, however, was not the case in Gibbon's native North East. There, his book remained unread but nonetheless condemned and his mother's rejection turned out to be the most hurtful for Gibbon. She claimed that Gibbon had made his family "the speak of the place" by "his insensitivity in writing of people and localities so exactly, and so unflatteringly, in *Sunset Song*" (Campbell 8). Gibbon found it therefore difficult to visit Scotland and according to Campbell, his relationship with his parents was full of tension and his visits were unhappy (Campbell 8). Therefore, Gibbon happily settled in England. Although he was able to physically remove himself from Scotland, his imagination remained haunted by Scottish symbols like land and language (Campbell 49-50). So in other words, his head was in England while his heart remained in Scotland. Gibbon died in 1935, at the age of 34. In his short writing career he published eleven novels, a couple of short story collections and books of anthropology and

exploration, all of which were published within a period of four years, between 1930 and 1934 (Gifford 49). Gifford claims that “[t]his is the intensity of a passionate young man, possibly aware of his shortness in time” (Gifford 49). Even though Gibbon hated the hard work and the life on the land, he certainly loved writing about it.

3.1 Duality in language and identity in *Sunset Song*

One of the main issues Gibbon addresses in *Sunset Song* is duality – an issue close to his heart – and it can be found in his treatment of the language as well as in the search for identity. Being the first book in Gibbon’s trilogy *A Scots Quair*, *Sunset Song* is about the rural farming community of Kinraddie in Northeast Scotland at the beginning of the twentieth century. The story follows the heroine Chris Guthrie from childhood to womanhood and her relationship with her environment, be it the community or the land and how these relationships affect her perception of herself.

Similar to Gibbon’s own struggles, one of Chris’s main struggles in the novel is that of double identity. She identifies herself as the Scottish Chris and the English Chris:

So that was Chris and her reading and schooling, two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart and tormented her. You hated the land and the coarse speak of the folk and learning was brave and fine one day; and the next you’d waken with the pewits crying across the hills, deep and deep, crying in the heart of you and the smell of the earth in your face, almost you’d cry for that, the beauty of it and the sweetness of the Scottish land and skies. You saw their faces in firelight, father’s and mother’s and the neighbours’ before the lamps lit up, tired and kind, faces dear and close to you, you wanted the words they’d known and used, forgotten in the far-off youngness of their lives, Scots words to tell to your heart how they wrung it and held it, the toil of their days and unendingly their fight.

And the next minute that passed from you, you were English, back to the English words so sharp and clean and true – for a while, for a while, till they slid so smooth from your throat you knew they could never say anything that was worth the saying at all. (Gibbon 32)

This paragraph could easily be seen as describing Gibbon's own struggle with his identity. Gifford describes Gibbon as having "a highly complex and restlessly changing personality" which is in some way mirrored in Chris Guthrie's "changing moods and values" (Gifford 47).

As previously mentioned, Gibbon escaped the hard work on the farm by reading books and he portrays a similar scene in *Sunset Song*: One evening after a hard day ploughing, John Guthrie finds his daughter Chris at the Standing Stones reading a book. He gets furious, snatches the book from her and calls it "dirt" (Gibbon 41). This attitude towards books and education was a common one in the Kinraddie farming community and without a doubt also in Gibbon's native community. The farmers seem to connect education and books (other than the Bible) with England and the English language and as a result they despise it and call it "dirt". It is therefore not hard to imagine that book-absorbed Gibbon felt superior to his family and community of ignorant farmers and he uses the English Chris's voice to express these feelings of superiority.

Equally, Gibbon uses the voice of the Scottish Chris to demonstrate the good qualities of the farming community. Campbell argues that the Scottish Chris "is the Chris of the sensory impression of the land, the sharp emotive memory, the irrational love of tradition, family, inherited language, inherited loyalty" (Campbell 59). It is true that the people might seem ignorant and gossip about each other constantly, but they stand by each other in times of trouble (Chae's fire) and celebration (Chris's wedding). Although Gibbon's portrayal of the people of Kinraddie might be regarded as "unflattering", deep down a hint of affection can be detected. His heart speaks for the Scottish Chris, while his head speaks for the English Chris.

Gibbon's identity crisis can also be seen in the style and the language of *Sunset Song*. Following the ideology of the Scottish Renaissance about preserving Scotland's indigenous languages, Gibbon successfully manages to write in a mixture of Scots and English. In doing so he is being true to both sides of himself, the Scottish farmer's son James Leslie Mitchell and the English writer Lewis Grassie Gibbon. In his introductory note to *Sunset Song*, Gibbon introduces his view on the relationship between Scots and English by using this hypothetical example of Dutch and German:

If the great Dutch language disappeared from literary usage and a Dutchman wrote in German a story of the Lekside peasants, one may hazard he would ask and receive a certain latitude and forbearance in his usage of German. He might import into his pages some score or so untranslatable words and idioms – untranslatable except in their context and setting; he might mould in some fashion his German to the rhythms and cadence of the kindred speech that his peasants speak. Beyond that, in fairness to his hosts, he hardly could go: to seek effect by a spray of apostrophes would be both impertinence and mis-translation.

The courtesy that the hypothetical Dutchman might receive from German a Scot may invoke from the great English tongue ("Introductory note" xiii).

This note further prepares the reader for Gibbon's mixed language style. By mixing English and Scots in *Sunset Song*, Gibbon manages to stay true to his native land and language (and his heart) as well as to appeal to a larger audience of non-Scots speakers. Gibbon's text looks English as he changed the spelling of some Scots words so they would look more English, so the English speaking reader would take the text as a variety of English; the Scots reader, on the other hand, would recognise the text and its rhythm, vocabulary and syntax as a variety of Scots (Campbell 53). In other words, Gibbon disguised Scottish words in English spelling.

However, the words might look similar but differ in meaning. For example, Gibbon wrote “braw” as “brave” but the Scots word does not have the same meaning as in English (“courageous”) – the word “braw” in Scots means “fine” (Campbell 88). On other occasions the Scots effect is achieved through rhythms and syntax rather than vocabulary and Campbell takes the following sentence as an example of a sentence “distinctively not English”(Campbell 88):

And down in Blawearie next day, what with cooking and chaving and tending to beasts, and wrestling with the worry of the barn, it wasn't half spruced for the dance, Chris might well have gone off her head if Chae and Long Rob of the Mill hadn't come dandering up the road in the afternoon, shy-like, bringing their presents (Gibbon 145).

Campbell argues that by mixing the styles, Gibbon makes the response mixed. Each reader reacts differently to the text and interprets it from his own experience and perspective, be it Scots, English or non-English. By mixing the two languages together, Gibbon manages to compromise and therefore creates a harmony between his head (his Englishness) and his heart (his Scottishness).

Gibbon further addresses the language conflict in the argument between Long Rob and Mr. Gordon at Chris's wedding. Rob thinks it is a shame that people are ashamed of speaking Scots: “Every damned little narrow-dowped rat that you meet put on the English if he thought he'd impress you – as though Scotch wasn't good enough now” (Gibbon 156). He then goes on attacking the English for its lack of words: “*You can tell me, man, what's the English for sotter, or greip, or smore, or pleiter, gloaming or glunching or well-kenspeckled? And if you said gloaming was sunset you'd fair be a liar; and you're hardly that, Mr Gordon*” (Gibbon 156). Gibbon describes Mr. Gordon as “real decent and reasonable” and his answer to Rob is: “*You can't help it Rob. If folk are to get on in the world nowadays, away from the*

ploughshafts and out of the pleiter, they must use the English, orra though it be” (Gibbon 156). This argument could easily have been between Gibbon’s own heart and head.

Gibbon’s language in *Sunset Song* is furthermore full of ambiguous images which Gifford links to Gibbon’s own confused feelings for his parents, his community and farming – being both positive and negative (Gifford 73-74). The title of the novel is a good example of this ambiguity. According to Gifford, a negative reading of the title implicates the “coming darkness and dying music”, whereas a positive reading would see the images of *Sunset and Song* as “images of beauty and life” (Gifford 73-74). Another important theme that carries an ambiguous meaning is that of “Harvest”. In a positive reading, the word indicates fertility and fruition, which can be seen in the numerous harvests of Kinraddie throughout the novel and in Chris giving birth to her son Ewan (Gifford 74). However, a negative reading suggests a certain loss, as Kinraddie’s men are being “‘harvested’ by the Great War” (Gifford 74).

Furthermore, Gifford takes the Standing Stones as yet another example of Gibbon’s ambiguity. On the one hand they are a refuge for Chris, a place where she experiences peace and comfort. But on the other hand they are “‘memorials of a dream long lost’ and signs of ‘ancient rites of blood and atonement’; that is, symbols of cruelty and death” (Gifford 73). By giving an ambiguous image of the title of the novel, the theme of harvest and the Standing Stones, Gibbon is again playing on the response of the reader and giving him the choice to interpret these elements as being positive or negative, or even both, based on his own experience and understanding.

3.2 History and legend in *Sunset Song*

In *Sunset Song*, Gibbon uses history as well as legend to create the community of Kinraddie. Moreover, he introduces a somewhat ambiguous theme of past versus the present. This theme is a typical one for the Scottish Renaissance as its writers were fascinated with modern

philosophy and ideology but simultaneously they were aware of the importance of preserving the legends and folklore of the past. In *Sunset Song*, Gibbon laments the end of a traditional farming community, like Gunn in *The Silver Darlings*, but instead of appreciating the past and looking hopeful to the future as Gunn did, Gibbon remembers only the sufferings in Scotland's history and sees nothing but struggles in Scotland's future (Campbell 48).

Gibbon's view is expressed in the minister's speech at the end of the novel. The speech is simultaneously a eulogy for the fallen men of Kinraddie and for the death of ancient traditions, as the minister claims that old Scotland has perished: "[W]e may believe that never again will the old speech and the old songs, the old curses and the old benedictions, rise but with alien effort to our lips" (Gibbon 256). In the same speech, the minister refers to the fallen men, Chae, Long Rob and Ewan as "the Last of the Peasants, the last of the Old Scots folk" – a tribe which now only lives in legends (Gibbon 256).

Gibbon introduces this element of legend by referring to the inhabitants of Kinraddie as the descendants of the "Elder People", whose characteristics included the love of raising crops, children and animals and a love for all organic and growing things (Gifford 80). The "Elder People" thus love the land and the ancient way of traditional farming and they are "instinctively hostile" towards anything that does not concern their land and their farming, such as national politics and "class snobbery" (Gifford 80). Gifford suggests that Gibbon's "Elder People" are the ancient peasant Picts, as Gibbon seems to favour them above other ancient tribes: "The Kelt, the Scot, the Norseman, the Norman were no more than small bands of raiders and robbers" while the Pict was satisfied with "the essentials of existence, his fields, his cattle, his woman" (Gifford 51).

Therefore, unlike Gunn who celebrated the mixed ancestry of the Scottish people, Gibbon seems to be annoyed with it. This can be explained by his ideas on Diffusionism presented in his essay "The Antique Scene", quoted in Gifford:

All human civilisations originated in Ancient Egypt. Through the accident of time and chance and the cultivation of wild barley in the valley of the Nile there arose in a single spot the urge in men to upbuild for their economic salvation the great fabric of civilisation. Before the planning of that architecture enslaved the minds of men, man was a free and happy and undiseased animal wandering the world in the Golden Age of the poets (and reality) from the Shetlands to Tierra del Fuego. And from that central focal point in Ancient Egypt the first civilisers spread abroad the globe the beliefs and practices, the diggings the plantings and indignation and shadowy revilements of archaic civilisation (Gifford 50).

For Gibbon, the first settlements of Picts and Celts in Scotland came in this way (Campbell 45). He regarded the Celts as being more savage and villainous than the Romans; they had no culture and were “incapable of poetry” and absorbed “only the worst of archaic practice” (Gifford 50). Gibbon’s contempt for the Celts can be explained by his hostility towards “what he saw as the romanticised view of Scotland’s history in the Gaelic revivals of his own time” (Campbell 45). Gibbon further believed that “if the Kelts were the first great curse of Scotland, the Norse were assuredly the second” (Campbell 45).

While the ancient Picts thus seem favoured by Gibbon over other ethnic groups of Scotland, Gibbon further emphasises the element of legend in *Sunset Song* by attributing legendary qualities to some of his characters. Like Gunn did with Finn in *The Silver Darlings*, Gibbon gives some of the legendary characteristics of William Wallace to Long Rob. He lives by his own values and follows his own principles. He does not yield to the demands of society and he fights to keep the ancient traditions alive by singing folksongs. Gifford sees him as representing “the old singers of an ancient culture”, striving to keep that culture alive, as it gradually loses “itself amidst modern change” (Gifford 79). Long Rob refuses to enlist in the army and participate in a war that he feels does not concern him or his way of life, until he

realises that his way of life on the land as he knows it is ending (Gifford 83). This makes him different from the legendary Wallace, who did not give up in the end and died for his nationalism (Campbell 46). Gifford suggests that Rob “is Spartacus or Wallace, with the crucial difference that he has lost the urge to start a rebellion” (Gifford 83). Rob is portrayed as a really strong character, but by making him of all people give up his values and his ancient culture, Gibbon is showing how even the strongest and the mightiest can lose hope when they see all that they love and cherish fade away.

4. The positive Gunn and the negative Gibbon

According to Gifford, Gibbon and Gunn contributed to “that great revival of spiritual awareness after the Great War which saw itself as struggling to find a way out of man’s self-created wasteland of the mind” (Gifford 1). Gifford further claims that this idea of a wasteland seems to have appealed to Scottish writers as many of them “use the idea as a pattern for re-discovery of social purposes and values” (Gifford 89). Gunn revives the wasteland through Roddie and Finn, “his Fisher-kings” and Gibbon envisages regeneration by raising awareness of ritual and symbol, Gifford suggests (Gifford 90).

As writers of the Scottish Renaissance, Gunn and Gibbon were aware of the importance of preserving the ancient traditions of their ancestors and interestingly enough, they did so by applying modern psychology. They used Carl Jung’s idea of “collective unconscious” to make their characters discover their identity with their ancestors (Gifford 10). This “collective unconscious” is a “deep racial memory and instinctive knowledge of tradition” acquired over thousands of years, “without being taught or learned” (Gifford 128). Therefore, both Chris and Finn instinctively seek refuge in the ancient remains of the Standing Stones and the House of Peace (Gifford 2). They are drawn to these spiritual places by their unconscious memories of their ancient identity and there they find comfort and peace.

Chris considers the Standing Stones to be “the only place where she could come and stand back a little from the clamour of the day” and leaning against the stone she finds it “strange and comforting” (Gibbon 108). Similarly, at the House of Peace, Finn finds his misery being drained away and he experiences “heedless freedom” (Gunn 419). Lying among the heavy stones, he comes “into the core of himself, where he was alone, and felt strangely companioned, not by anyone or anything, but by himself” (Gunn 419).

There are numerous supernatural experiences in *The Silver Darlings* and *Sunset Song* and they especially come in the form of dreams or some kind of second sight. Finn’s vision of “the figure of the old, quiet man” at the House of Peace and Chris’s vision of the “foreign creature, black-bearded, half-naked” man are examples of these supernatural experiences (Gunn 419; Gibbon 39). However, Gifford claims that these events can be quite puzzling and the reader wonders if he is in fact witnessing a supernatural event, or if he is supposed to interpret these events on a psychological level (Gifford 128-129). Gifford suggests that the reader is allowed to interpret these events as he wishes – at the supernatural or the psychological level – or as a mixture of both (Gifford 129).

There are many other similarities to be found in Gunn’s *The Silver Darlings* and Gibbon’s *Sunset Song*. Both novels are semi-autobiographical and semi-historical in the sense that the authors weave historical events into the plot of their story, like the Great War in *Sunset Song* and the plague in *The Silver Darlings*, and the authors make their main characters struggle with the same issues and problems that they themselves struggled with, like their search for identity. Gunn and Gibbon share a common attitude towards Scottish history and they see the events of the last thousand years of Scottish social and political history as essentially bad for Scotland, especially the consequences of the Scottish Reformation in 1560 (Gifford 10). Gifford suggests that both in *The Silver Darlings* and *Sunset Song* there is “a common hatred of authoritarian and land-exploiting imperialist attitudes to traditional

Community” (Gifford 10). Both authors regard nature and community as fundamental elements in a person’s development and as such these elements become like characters in the novels. Gifford comments that in *The Silver Darlings* “the land is spiritual, animate and filled with living qualities” and similarly, Gibbon’s countryside in *Sunset Song* seems to be watching its inhabitants (Gifford 13).

Although the two authors seem to use similar methods and the novels share many characteristics, they differ in spirit, which can mainly be seen in the authors’ use of and attitudes towards song and music in the novels. Gifford goes so far as to refer to *The Silver Darlings* as “the Song of Life” and *Sunset Song* as “the Song of Death” (Gifford 116; 71). Both authors believed that folklore and folk songs were an important part of their cultural heritage as they believed that songs and legends carried ancient knowledge (Gifford 34). Gifford argues that both Gunn and Gibbon see song as “the comprehensive symbol for living tradition, a ‘music’ or socially harmonious force generated by the community for the community, enriching and enshrining its most precious values and remembrances” (Gifford 78).

In *The Silver Darlings*, Gunn uses music in a positive way. He uses it as a tool to help Finn to identify himself with his ancestral past. Gifford argues that “Finn will at critical points in his life realise truth through the medium of a story or song and sometimes through giving his own experience form through controlling it in his own storytelling” (Gifford 135). In the chapter “As the Rose Grows Merry in Time”, Finn hears a girl sing the lullaby his mother had used to sing to him. For Finn, the song is “charged with a power that held his quivering body in its invisible hand” and Finn experienced the song as it were effortlessly evolving “out of a memory so old that it was quiet with contemplation” (Gunn 543). The song reminded him of his mother and “[l]ove for his mother cried out in him” (Gunn 544). Here, Gunn uses the

lullaby to help Finn realise just how much his mother means to him, which is an important part of his development into manhood.

In *Sunset Song*, on the other hand, Gibbon uses song and music to grieve for the loss of old Scotland and the fading of traditional Scottish farm life. He laments this end of an era, where the time of the Picts has ended. This is most noticeable at Chris's wedding, as on this happy occasion the people only think of sad songs to sing and Chris reflects on this:

[I]t came on to Chris how strange was the sadness of Scotland's singing, made for the sadness of the land and sky in dark autumn evenings, the crying of men and women of the land who had seen their lives and loves sink away in the years, things wept for beside the sheep-buchts, remembered at night and in twilight. The gladness and kindness had passed, lived and forgotten, it was Scotland of the mist and rain and the crying sea that made the songs (Gunn 165-166).

It is then quite clear that Gunn and Gibbon use song and music to convey different emotions in their novels.

The Silver Darlings is furthermore filled with hope and new beginnings while *Sunset Song* is rather pessimistic. This difference can be explained by the authors' different experiences and attitudes towards their native land. While Gunn's experience seems to be a happy one, Gibbon's experience is filled with conflict and confusion. Gifford argues that Gunn is the novelist "of regeneration and hope, while Gibbon seems finally to speak of despair" (Gifford 147). Gifford further argues that they "are the Light and the Dark, the positive and negative of the spectrum of the attitudes of the Renaissance writers" (Gifford 147).

Conclusion

As writers of the Scottish Renaissance, Gunn and Gibbon had much in common. They embraced modern theories in philosophy and psychology while they cherished the ancient traditions of their forefathers. They had similar attitudes towards Scottish history and they acknowledged the importance of history in finding one's roots, but they also looked at how local legends and folklore are tied in with a person's notion of identity. As a result, Gunn and Gibbon's novels, *The Silver Darlings* and *Sunset Song*, are in many ways very similar. They both deal with rural communities and its inhabitants, language and legends. The novels are historical with elements of legend and the supernatural and they both follow the main character from childhood to adulthood and explain the importance of nature and community in the character's development. Both Gunn and Gibbon used their personal experience of Scotland and Scottish identity to create their own Scottish identity in their novels, but as their experiences were quite different, the results are different. For Gunn, Scottish identity is to acknowledge the past and celebrate the mixed ancestry of Scotland, but for Gibbon, Scottish identity is tainted by the sufferings of the past and is filled with conflicting emotions and duality. These contrasting ideas show how hard it is to find a fitting identity for a whole nation. It further suggests that a person's identity ("I-identity") is personal, based on personal experiences and is influenced by the person's views on history, community, legend and language.

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