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Neil M. Gunn's Drama**
by Richard Price

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by Richard Price

Neil M. Gunn, one of the principal Scottish novelists of the twentieth century, began writing plays from the mid-1920s, and continued to write drama and (especially latterly) radio dramatisations up until the 1960s. It is the aim of this essay to look again at this much-neglected aspect of Gunn's work, to demonstrate how his drama tried to appeal to as wide an audience as possible, how it was both a didactic and political drama, and yet how it contained elements which can be securely described as "experimental."

This is not to evade the generally accepted view that the formal nature of Gunn's plays tends to be less innovative than his novels, nor the view that his overall stagecraft was undeveloped. With important reservations, I believe these judgments, which underlie Hart and Pick's referring to Gunn's drama as a "Detour," to be correct.¹ The argument here, rather, will attempt to establish how, despite what might be considered to be flaws, his plays attempted to permeate every level of the dramatic infrastructure in Scotland. Of further issue is how these plays directly confronted issues of Scottish society few Scottish plays of the time seem to have referred to, and how, in a climate hostile to experimentation, some attempted to incorporate presentational techniques disruptive of a naturalistic mode of narrative.

In 1922, Christopher Murray Grieve described the contemporary situation:

[George] Blake, [John] Brandane, Neil Grant, J. J. Bell, Hugh Robertson, and others are writing plays superficially Scottish—or at any rate superficially subscribing to the stock-conception of what is Scottish—but, apart from the fact that these plays are in every respect inferior to English or Irish plays in their respective genre, and are entirely destitute of literary distinction or significance, it must be emphasised that in embodiment and effect they are not only not Scottish but anti-Scottish. ... The appetency for such entertainments exists in direct ratio to the denationalisation of those who produce and patronise them; and for example is any Scot more denationalised, more incapable of reacting in a typically national way than the Scot who imagines that extensions of village idiocy or calf-love akin to those with which the music hall genius of Harry Lauder has so long proliferated, or the exhibitionism due to inbreeding and sectarianism exemplified in Kailyard productions, or the cinema excesses of Celticism, are in the slightest degree Scottish? These things bear the same relation to that which is essentially Scottish as the average best seller bears to what is really literature.

The picture is of a drama which has not learnt from the new plays of other countries and which, like the novel, has been distressingly infected by the Kailyard and the Celtic Twilight. David Hutchison notes that a large number of plays of the interwar period, though written by Lowland writers, dealt with the Highlands and these usually treated Highlanders stereotypically and as figures of fun.³ At the time, comedies which bore the strong influence of the music hall were common, but there were also plays which borrowed popular genres from abroad. Specifically in Inverness, for example, Gunn would have found a staple fare of Kailyard plays, but also thrillers and plays about American gangsters.⁴

Grieve's blanket survey has to be handled carefully. There were some attempts at more intelligent plays in Scotland, though it is notable that they occurred some time after Grieve's criticism. For example, J. A. Ferguson's *The King of Morven*, staged at Glasgow's Lyric Theatre in 1926, although still based in what appears to be, the early nineteenth century, is a disturbing Munrolike fable of Highland emigration. James Bridie had *Sunlight Sonata* performed in Glasgow in 1928, and went on to write more important plays. Moreover, because Grieve focused on drama in Scotland rather than Scottish drama, and perhaps because he held a very dim view of Scottish successes in England, he was also dismissive of Barrie's considerable non-naturalistic achievements on the London stage, a prejudice which only R. D. S. Jack's *The Road to the Never Land* (Aberdeen, 1991) has begun to redress in Scotland.

That said, Grieve's mention of superior Irish plays would have found favour with Gunn, who was enthusiastic about the Abbey Theatre in Dublin which he visited in the 1920s (NMG, p.85).

Characteristically, the poet also favoured "high" and avant-garde drama which did not just deal with important issues but created its own techniques and modes of presentation. In the same article he suggested that the innovations of a new Scottish drama might include:

The extension of the theatre into the midst of the audience, or the abolition of platform and scenic detachment altogether—the extensive re-adaptation of the method of progress by soliloquy along lines appropriate to Scottish self-disclosure—the deliberate extirpation of English influences and rejection of English expedients of all kinds and the search for effective Continental affiliation—all these must be considered.⁶

In short, Grieve was suggesting the disruption of dramatic conventions along the principles which we recognise now in Brecht and Pirandello, in political and in modernist theatre.

Nationalism framed Grieve's modernist argument. The Scottish National Players, a company operating from Glasgow and presenting new Scottish plays, were saved full censure from Grieve only because, he argued, they unconsciously disseminated "the idea that there is (or rather should be) a difference between Scottish and English drama, [though] intelligent people who witness these productions will see that nevertheless no such difference exists and ask why?" Grieve's ideas for a new drama—that it should be experimental as well as politically challenging within a specifically Scottish context—were in part shared by Gunn, who sent two of his earliest plays to Grieve for advice. One of those plays, "The Ancient Fire," performed by the Scottish National Players at the Glasgow Lyric in late 1929, is a good example of a play which uses non-naturalistic techniques to deal with nationalist issues.³

In the correspondence between Gunn and the Scottish playwright John MacIntyre ("John Brandane"), it is clear that Gunn identified with Grieve's ideas. Though Gunn's letters do not appear to have survived, his attitude can be ascertained from MacIntyre's desire to steer him away from attempts at the innovative:

About your modernist Scots drama. I don't think the "modernist" element should obtrude itself much. Seek first drama—a very elusive and not easily characterised affair—and the rest shall be added unto you. But of course take it in Scots rain and wind and snow if you can for the Auld Mither has need of its wings and its song: modern then if you like or very ancient, so long as the elfin thing is Scots drama. And if propaganda comes in, why not? So long as it [is] ancillary to drama it can do no harm. To make drama servant to a sermon, however, needs the genius of a Shaw, doesn't it?⁹

Even MacIntyre's diction—"the elfin thing" betrays his Celtic Twilight influences. In this paragraph and elsewhere he rejects for Scotland all of Grieve's tenets: the experimental (which I take to be what "modernist" means here), the expression of contemporary issues ("modern"), the polemical ("propaganda"), and, at least by implication, the national preoccupations. The latter MacIntyre rejected more explicitly by arguing that the great contemporary innovators did not work out of a consciousness of their own country's traditions and culture:

Pirandello, Tchekov and Ibsen developed techniques all different for anything that had gone before—but these were expressions of individual character and not of any Italian, Russian or Norwegian outlook.¹⁰

MacIntyre's disregard of historical context, the legacy perhaps of a late Victorian aestheticism which divorced political considerations from art, would not have found sympathy with Gunn who argued, again and again, for the need to understand authors within a historical and national perspective. Commentators today on Pirandello, Chekhov, and Ibsen are rather less ready than MacIntyre to dismiss national influences.

The repertory theatre, as represented by the Scottish National Players, was one area of dramatic activity in which Gunn sought to have his plays placed, succeeding, as already noted, with "The Ancient Fire" (that this was the only three-act play thus performed indicates a minimal success). But this was not the only area. By 1926, approximately the time Gunn started writing plays, a new fashion in Scottish theatre was entering what became its boom decade.

Utilising new short plays (usually only one act), "community drama" operated through local amateur companies who could produce plays in local halls and, if they so chose, present them at competitions organised by the newly-created Scottish Community Drama Association.¹¹ It recognised a previously unplumbed need for involvement in the performance arts and, though more often used in a solely entertaining fashion (if anything is "solely" entertaining), its popularity meant it was a potentially powerful means of disseminating art and ideas to those who might not otherwise think in terms of high art and radical politics. Community drama was also widely reviewed in Scottish newspapers. As such it was an attractive form for Gunn, both in artistic and political terms, and he wrote at least seven one-act plays in the community drama mould. C. J. L. Stokoe's *A Bibliography of the Works of Neil M Gunn* (Aberdeen, 1987) shows that many of these were published in *The Scots Magazine*, but some were published individually by Porpoise, by Faber, Walter

Wilson (Glasgow), and by Nelson, and some were collected in anthologies, notably Back Home in Harraps' *The Best One-Act Plays of 1931*, selected by J. M. Marriott. As the unqualified title and English publisher of Marriott's selection suggest, Gunn's drama made some small impact beyond Scotland.

A final important area of drama for Gunn was that of radio. This developing and increasingly influential medium he targeted early in its history. His one-act play *The Hawk's Feather*, for instance, was broadcast from Aberdeen by the BBC in September 1929. Though a play suitable for community drama might translate into radio, Gunn also wrote specifically with broadcasting in mind (for instance "Old Highland Ballet," though never performed, was written for this purpose). He also adapted short stories as dramatisations for radio.¹² A further illustration of his creative versatility was the technique he used in the 1940s to write essentially non-fiction broadcasts about the Highlands and Islands within a dramatic format. "In The Land We Defend: The Western Highlands and Islands of Scotland," for instance, he personifies the various regions and the sea and makes them dispute with each other. This latter, very different, category is not discussed further in this essay.¹³

Gunn's plays can be seen, therefore, not only as spanning the distance between a vision of cutting-edge theatre, the unrealised potential represented by the Scottish National Players, and the humbler aims of the community drama movement, but as infiltrating perhaps all the categories of drama available to him in Scotland. His plays also maintained his presence at large at a time when, despite the critical success of *The Grey Coast* (London, 1926), his novel *The Lost Glen* (Edinburgh, 1932) was being refused by publisher after publisher. In the end, his writing of a third more congenial novel *Morning Tide* (Edinburgh, 1931) resolved this problem and *The Lost Glen* was published on the strength of that book's success. Acceptance of the plays of this early period, he wrote to Nan Shepherd, "All means that our forces are beginning to make a slight impression."¹⁴

Perhaps the most immediate characteristic of many of these plays is their head-on presentation of political and economic problems. Though it is fair to regard *The Lost Glen* as a polemical exception among the novels, the plays reveal much more than a passing interest in writing creatively with politics in mind. Some of the plays, but by no means all, are contemporaneous with the creation of *The Lost Glen*. This suggests that the late 1920s were a time in which Gunn, becoming increasingly attracted to nationalism and involved at an organisational level in the National Party of Scotland, felt an urgent wish to translate his political convictions into art. While national politics do not surface so explicitly in his novels as a whole, the later plays which concentrate on political topics show that Gunn did not rule out serious discussion of "domestic" issues even when he was better established as a novelist. Margery McCulloch's observation that Gunn's non-fiction articles joined his plays in constituting a "recurrent investigation of [Highland] decline" can be re-expressed in terms of Gunn differentiating between media, finding in the one-act play and the essay a direct platform for the practical business of politics, and reserving the novels for longer-paced ideas which, though broaching political subjects, had a more traditionally universal artistic framework.¹⁵

Gunn did not deal only with the Highlands, however. The unpublished "The Ancient Fire," for instance, while having its second act set in the Western Highlands has the first and last act set in Glasgow. This play presents on the one hand a city whose virtual mono-industry of shipbuilding has made whole communities dependent on warship contracts, and on the other, a Highland estate controlled by a member of the American *nouveaux riches*. It opens and closes in a draper's shop in Glasgow's Gorbals, with the wives of unemployed shipworkers trying to buy shirts on credit for their husbands. It describes a city where the police monitor, arrest, and even deport those with Bolshevik sympathies (Act, I, S. 1). With such a scenario, it is difficult to see why Gunn and the play were omitted from Hutchison's survey, especially given Hutchison's analysis of the drama of the period as failing to address urban problems while eliciting "an obsession with the past, with rural life and with the Highlands."¹⁶ "The Ancient Fire" shows an early and unrecognised artistic treatment of the twentieth-century city not only within Gunn's oeuvre but within Scottish drama as a whole.

It also shows not only a tension between images of city and countryside but a servant-master relationship common to both. One character in thrall to the American laird says to him:

You think money can experience anything. It can't. It gives the power that kills, that destroys. It makes everything its slave. It degrades. Its power is a terrible crime. It builds the cities and slums you come from [...]. It makes poverty-and that's worse. (Act 2, Sc. 3)

In short, the play attempts to unite Highlands and Lowlands through a critique of capitalism, another artistic response to contemporary Scotland worthy of note.

The one-act *Glendaruel*, printed in *The Scots Magazine* in 1929 and therefore contemporary with

“The Ancient Fire,” is even more a city play.¹⁷ Wholly based in Glasgow, its subject, a discussion of the murder of a prostitute, again tries to relate countryside issues with urban ones: the murderer is apparently an immigrant from the Highlands. The characters, a Highlander (Mac), a Lowlander (Armstrong), and an Englishman (Smith), escape the joke-scenario such a *dramatis personae* suggests and, as the Scottish characters compose satirically romantic versions of the story, the play becomes a short but sophisticated investigation of fictions which have created, and controlled, contemporary Scotland. The prostitute’s name, Mary Stewart, and the song which is sung at the scene of her death (“Deirdre’s Farewell” or “Glendaruel”) provide bitter antagonistic entertainment for the journalists as they make the name and song symbolic:

ARMSTRONG: (*Lays down paper and proceeds to dictate. His compressed expression suggests that he may have in view the satisfaction of getting at Mac indirectly.*) A shocking tragedy was discovered this evening in Doordre Street, Cowcaddens. A young woman, named Mary Stewart, was found with her throat cut in a small room which she tenanted along with her grandmother Nell Stewart, better known in the neighbourhood as Nell-the-Tink, the street player and spaewife.

It is believed that these Stewarts originally belonged to the fairly well-known tinker clan of that name—

SMITH: (*writing*)—Ah that’s the stuff!

ARMSTRONG (*after a sardonic glance*): And-and sometimes referred to still in this country as the Clan Royal. Ah-ah-

MAC: You’ve put him off his stride, Smith.

SMITH: Shut up, Mac! Proceed, Armstrong. I’ll give you a typed dup. of your own eloquence *toute de suite*.

MAC (*to Smith*): The Clan Royal touch should be rather good for your write-up for the People’s Weekly.

SMITH: Thanks awfully for nothing. My dear fellow, it’s going to be the feature. Good Scotsmen—that is, Scots buddies—will discuss it on the way to—to kirk. I shall make them look forever after on the tinker clan royal with a wild amaze—all the way from the blue peaks of Assynt to the church spires of (*swallowing it*) Ecclefeckan. Mr. Armstrong, Sir?

ARMSTRONG: How Nell Stewart came to leave her clan, why she abandoned many years ago the roving ways of her people, the encampments by lonely roads, the crying of peewit and whaup across the stillness of moors in the night-time—

SMITH (*his shorthandpencilfying*): Oh nyum-nyum!

ARMSTRONG: Will make a story that is old as the Gaelic race itself, that only a Gaelic journalist could write—but that no Gaelic journalist will write, because it gives away his dark secret, strips it (*with a slight gesture*) of its most enigmatic politeness.

SMITH (*charmed*): Shades of Cookoolin! (p. 180)

Once again, the mere outline of this play, its engagement with urban problems outside the propriety of the middle classes, and especially its interest in fictional representations of Scotland, show that Gunn was writing a drama that was socially aware and intellectually searching. His interest in the effect of the Stewart myth on Scotland, the radical reinterpretation of which Murray Pittock identifies as a constituent part of the Scottish Renaissance, also surfaces in *The Hawk’s Feather*, discussed below.¹⁸

Distinct from these national plays are those which, though with nationalistic undertones, deal much more specifically with Highland problems. These are one-act, one-issue plays: *Old Music*, about emigration from the Highlands, *Hail, Caledonian!*, about the Scottish contribution to the failure of a Westminster Bill which would have given the Highlands hydro-electric power at a much earlier date than the region eventually received it, and *Net Results* about the bankruptcy of North-east herring fishermen.¹⁹ Like his overtly national plays and *The Lost Glen*, the issues are deliberately and provocatively up-to-date.

In *Net Results* for example, a fisherman, Tom, and his father are hosts to their bank manager who is effectively threatening to foreclose on the loan taken out to buy their boat. In their defence Tom reels off statistics, detailing the mark-up for sellers of fish, as well as the overall decline in prices. This involves contemporary cash values and the effect is to show that the fisherman is fully aware of the financial side of

his work, and that he is neither a spendthrift nor financially naive. Tom's lengthy and climactic presentation of these statistics before the banker—they take up some forty lines in the printed text—is a deliberate attempt to present a set of alternative accounts, to show that the figures in which the banker prides himself in having mastered to professional proficiency have parallel figures that are as fully realised, and costed, by the fishermen. Tom is not mystified by arithmetic or professional status. Rather, it is the banker who has, indeed requires, a selective view of the economic system in order to play his part in it. This refusal of larger meaning paradoxically allows the banker to be omnipotent, as Tom's satirical but exasperated final flourish implies:

TOM: Yes. During these last ten years we have put hundreds of tons of the finest fresh fish on the market. Hundreds of tons of food for the people of this country. Hundreds of tons of food. If we had got half the average retail price we would have made a fortune. Yet here we are being sold up as bankrupts, reduced to beggars, as if we had committed a crime.

BANKER: I see your point. I sympathise with you. But that does not meet the present difficulty. Without the bank you would have had no boat at all.

TOM: The bank has given, the bank has taken away, blessed be the bank. (p.28)

Gunn realised that those likely to be presenting this community drama might find the fishing data difficult to convey naturally, and so he supplied special instructions in his Acting Notes:

Though these lines are full of what, at first sight, may appear to be statistics on the fishing industry, the actor must realise that these speeches contain the dramatic justification for the play. There is a passionate truth behind "figures" when these very figures spell disaster for the man who is quoting them. As the three men discuss their business, drama is provided in the strong contrast in character. (p.31)

These directions, which are over and above those which intersperse the conversation, are accompanied by advice on making the other characters behave as realistically as possible, and the text also has Gunn's stage diagram. These details illustrate Gunn's commitment to the *craft* of theatre and they show, even when writing in the framework of community drama, how he consciously tried to bring to Scottish drama difficult and problematic situations

As the serious playing with Scottish myths in "The Ancient Fire" and *Glendaruel* illustrates, Gunn's drama makes the sophisticated connection between fictive representations of Scotland and its reality. In *Old Music*, the Highlands are shown to be a particular victim of romanticisation. While the grandson of Mrs. Ross embarks on a steamer bound for Canada, Mrs. Ross is asked to sing mournfully for the benefit of an English collector of Gaelic songs, the comically-named Mrs. Smith-Wanders who says:

'You see, what I am trying to do: is to preserve the old lovely music you have—before it dies out altogether. I think it would be an awful tragedy if *it* died with the old folk and no record was kept' (pp.15-6)

The paradox of the English treatment of the Highlands is encapsulated in the circumstances of this speech: the culture is admired but the people are irrelevant (indeed, their irrelevance adds to the value of their cultural "products"). The exploitive nature of the collector's intrusive and almost palaeontological approach to "sublime" Highland culture links it with the emigration of Mrs. Ross's grandson. *Old Music* offers, therefore, a critique of the representations of Highland society, identifying such images with the destructive economic forces of which emigration was, and is, one result.

In his grasp of this inter-relationship, and his creative expression of it, Gunn anticipates Peter Womack's analysis of the effects of centuries of romanticisation of the Highlands: "the more elevated the Highland image becomes, and the more poignantly gratifying its evocations of human nobility, the more ruinously it pays for its moral splendour by its separation from practical life."²⁰ The first words spoken by Mrs. Smith-Wanders as she sees Mrs. Ross singing in an expression of grief are: "Isn't she perfect" (p. 13). "Does she always do it like that? [her nephew asks.] No. Musical emotion. Really carried away. They're marvellous like that. Do you feel the Celtic gloom?" (p.14)

What the plays offer us, therefore, is not only a political aspect of Gunn one might not have gleaned from a casual reading of most of his novels, but his understanding of the potentially destructive nature of myth. Indeed, what amounts to a caricaturing of the music collector in *Old Music*, like the caricature of the

ex-colonial officer Hicks in *The Lost Glen*, returns, as it were, the serve of stereotyping into the English court. The English cease to have reality, while Highlanders become flesh and blood.

While this in itself is a partial view, an antagonism Gunn worked through in his novels, it is important to realise that this was occurring while he was writing books. Though the precise time cannot be pinpointed, *Old Music* and *Net Results* are products of the middle to late 1930s and as such were written in the same period as the writing of *Wild Geese Overhead* and *Second Sight* (itself a re-working of a three-act play of the same name). *The Silver Darlings* was in genesis in these years, too. With this in mind, the sensitivity to the implications of fictive constructions as expressed in the plays invite us to read Gunn's novels much more as a re-negotiation of vital myths not only of the Highlands, or of Scotland, but of the individual and his or her world view. This, I would suggest, is how Gunn's novels are increasingly being read. The plays can be seen therefore as introducing what amounts in the novels to a deliberate choosing of stories and images which connect with reality, positing a carefully balanced and constructive alternative to the centuries-old paradox of praise-in-print but destruction-in-deed.

In his novels, Gunn's forging of an optimistic poetic on to a hard-headed attitude towards problem-solving took the best part of the 1920s and the early 1930s to achieve. What has become regarded as a characteristic of Gunn's fiction, the upbeat resolution of his plots, is not so evident in earlier books such as *Butcher's Broom* and of course *The Lost Glen*, both novels whose denouements are tragic. This can be related not just to Highland decline but to the Great Depression itself. Indeed, even an apparently optimistic mid-career novel such as his magnum opus *The Silver Darlings* is undercut by the hints (and hindsight's certain knowledge) of the economic slump about to affect the eastern seaboard as the novel draws to a close. In the plays, which extend into the late 1930s, there is almost always a pessimistic, inconclusive ending.

In *Old Music*, the old woman and her son agree that she will *not* sing for the music collector after she has been persuaded to return tomorrow, but their last words recognise the finality of the emigration which has touched them both so personally. "He's gone," she says. Her son says simply, "Yes," and the curtain falls (p.25). Again, Gunn provides Acting Notes for the handling of this. He stresses the difference between his play and other representations of the Highlands:

Usually the acting of plays from a Gaelic background is too thickly steeped in gloom with a tendency to have speech drawn out in a mournful *ochone* tone. Actually the characters in this play as in real life, do their best to fight against exhibiting sorrow. (p.26)

As a letter from John MacIntyre to Gunn shows, the latter was sensitive to contemporary misrepresentation of the Highlands, finding the comic parts of MacIntyre's Argyll play *The Glen is Mine*, published under his pseudonym John Brandane, close to Harry Lauder. Brandane replied:

And even when my comedy is broad, I claim I am fighting against the caricature of the Graham Moffats and the Harry Lauders and the Will Fyffes and "Punch's" Highlanders and that of the Londoner's squint-vision. That you should think I link up with these, I can only attribute to your previous acquaintanceship with the poor stage versions [of *The Glen is Afine*] as done in Inverness ... and to your lack of acquaintance with the people of Argyll.²

This, then, is one reason why Gunn gives extra advice to the actors on how to play the Highlanders in *Old Music*. This establishes his play as one set against Celtic Twilight distortions or indeed music hall influences, clearing the way for an avoidance of a lachrymose or histrionic closure. The play ends quietly on a note of fatal acceptance, and life in the old place goes on" (p.26).

A "note of fatal acceptance," however, characterises the presentation, rather than indulgence, of fatalism which constitutes many of the plays. "The Ancient Fire" ends with the death of the main protagonist's friend and the resumption of dependency on naval contracts for the Gorbals' survival. *Net Results* ends with the banker's intransigence and the fisherman's forlorn hope of finding new guarantors for his loan. Another play, *Back Home* (Glasgow, 1932) concludes with the hero, a student returned to the Highlands from studies in the Central Belt, despairing at the enervated way of life he finds waiting for him; he finally deserts his family.²²

Once again, the trenchancy of *The Lost Glen* can be seen in microcosm in the plays. Coming after a presentation of the contemporary Highlands, or (more rarely) contemporary Glasgow, both areas exhausted from within and pressurised from without, the endings of the plays pack a polemical punch rather than re-tread the Twilight enjoyment of woe. Unlike most of the twentieth century dramatic presentations of Scotland before he began writing plays, Gunn's arise from a basis not only of wishing to describe Scotland as its

exists in the Now, but from his ability to present these issues seriously and movingly. While it would be fatuous to compare Gunn's drama to Brecht's on technical criteria, the unease with which Gunn's plays end, while avoiding the idea of the completion/purgation of grand tragedy, shares the penetrating discomfort of Brecht's endings. Gunn seems to ask the same questions asked in the Epilogue to *The Good Woman of Setzuan*:

We feel deflated too. We too are nettled
To see the curtain down and nothing settled.
How could a better ending be arranged?
Could one change people? Can the world be changed?
Would new gods do the trick? Will atheism?
Moral rearmament? materialism?
It is for you to find a way, my friends
To help good men arrive at happy ends.
Yes write the happy ending to the play!
There must, there must, there's got to be a way!²³

There is a tendency for Gunn to use realism in plays where a realistic portrayal of the victim-characters is of the essence. Centuries of fantastic portrayals of the Highlands and its inhabitants meant that one strategy of a modern Highland drama was to strip the myths away. The Glasgow plays do not fail to acknowledge Glasgow's profound problems of poverty either.

As we have seen, in the plays which use realism there is a special sensitivity towards the reality gap. In *Glendaruel*, for instance, this amounts to the difference between a prostitute being murdered in a Glasgow slum and, discussed by the main characters, the all-too delicious tragic myths of Mary Queen of Scots, the Stewarts, and of Deirdre leaving Scotland for her death in Ireland. Formally speaking, the action of the play is merely the discussion between three journalists, eventually broken by the entrance of the old woman who had been singing "Glendaruel" and who rather disconcertingly has been muttering offstage for some time previous—this surely constitutes a non-traditional device, and can be calculated to have a disturbing effect when performed. In other words, *Glendaruel* is a play of ideas: the static form of the play, though deliberately undercut by those whispers, focuses on discussion and psychological interaction between the characters rather than physical action.

However, Gunn also used non-realistic narrative techniques. "The Ancient Fire" has a nightmare sequence which shows more clearly how Gunn was willing to at least press at the edges of experimentation. The hero of the play, the middle-aged shopkeeper Lachlan, accidentally knocks himself out on the troublesome antlers of a shot stag he had earlier found terminally wounded and had destroyed. The stage is darkened and Gunn instructs there to be only a "thin spectral greenish-blue light" illuminating it. Lachlan's double rises from what for all the audience knows might be a corpse. There then follows a sequence in which Lachlan tries to strangle his friend the caged-bird seller, an American tries to seduce a Highland girl, and an elderly woman interjects by singing a Gaelic air. When the American sees the stag and cries out that a man has been "crucified on a stag's horns" Lachlan wakes up and the disturbing dream is over.

The technical difficulty of Lachlan rising from his own body seems to have been solved by having an extra lie on the horns, the actor playing Lachlan subsequently taking up a position elsewhere on the stage for the duration of the dream. Unfortunately, on the first night the extra was not visible from the dress circle of the Lyric and this caused some contusion!²⁴ From the beginning of their correspondence, MacIntyre tried to have the whole scene and other parts of the play changed, enclosing pages of amendments. While MacIntyre's stage sense has to be acknowledged as that of a playwright with considerable experience, Gunn's marginalia to these suggestions show again how distant the two were in ambition and artistic understanding. For instance, Gunn insists that stage technology should be used to help tell the narrative: the use of special lighting should be enough to indicate that the sequence is that of a dream, whereas MacIntyre had suggested partitioning the stage. Gunn's curt "No!" in the margin occurs where MacIntyre tries to give the Highlanders dialogue which had more business in the music hall. For example, MacIntyre suggested the addition of phrases such as "och, och."²⁵

MacIntyre wanted to write the stag out of the scene altogether, admitting that the symbolism of the antlers would be lost, but Gunn was adamant: "But it mustn't be lost. If the symbolism is lost I'd rather it not played at all."²⁶ In fact, the stag is central to the play. Satirically glancing at Landseer's "The Monarch of the Glen," it is used by Gunn in the same way as the self-impaling aspect of the thistle in MacDiarmid's *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle*: 'The Presbyterian thistle flourishes,;And its am roses crucifies. ... '(11. 2246-7).

Indeed, in the final act, one character, significantly a communist (Gunn and MacDiarmid anticipate the alleged left-wing interests of the “Auden generation” by years) actually likens the stag to a thistle, a comparison which constitutes an early artistic echo of MacDiarmid’s masterpiece. As in the poem, Scotland’s own myths seem to crucify Scotland. The lungs of Lachlan’s friend are punctured by the antlers in the crush of Gorbals people who follow the strange sight of a man in Glasgow with a stag across his shoulders. As the communist tells Lachlan, what could have been a triumphal procession of defiance of the law (the stag is technically poached), becomes an embarrassed and pathetic fiasco:

A Scotsman hasn’t it in him to be a rebel, I know. But—to see a man like you- the fire of our race— followed by the people like a conqueror ... acting as if von were hunted hiding the damn thing, ashamed of it ... crawling back here—for what—to sell to a miserable woman for her workless husband—a cheap shirt.

The dream sequence therefore is not expendably detached from the rest of the play. It concentrates the play’s symbols, of which the stag is but one, and in so doing alerts or confirms to the audience that the play is working at a deliberately symbolic level outside the nightmare itself MacIntyre felt that it plunged the audience from a basically realistic narrative into one they would not be able to understand.

It seems to me that you may have had Pirandello’s *Six Characters in Search of an Author* in mind when you wrote the ‘Unconscious’ scene. But Pirandello’s Play has only 2 pages (and those the first 2) out of 71 pages where the Plane of Reality alone is made use of. The following whole 9 pages are concerned with the inter-mingling of the Planes of Dream & Reality—whereas your ‘Unconscious’ Scene is one scene of the Dream World interjected into a world of Reality (so-called) [...] Pirandello’s play has a unity yours hasn’t, and there is therefore no puzzlement introduced by a sudden leap such as you make.²⁷

Today, it is difficult to see how an audience could misunderstand the intention of the scene. At the time, however, MacIntyre was, practically speaking, right. *it did* lead to some in the audience failing to grasp the idea of the play, and it contributed to reviewers lamenting in the play as a whole the lack “entirely of any semblance of dramatic form” (*NMG*, p.89).

While part of the problem was also what John MacNair Reid called an “amateurish” cast and a “middling” producer (Tyrone Guthrie, whom Gunn expected to produce the play, had left, unexpectedly, for the South), this reception, I would argue, is more revealing about the state at the time of Scottish drama, and the consequent receptivity of its audience, than it is of failings in “The Ancient Fire” (*NMG*, p.88). In the late 1920s, when theatre-going Scots had been receiving by and large formally and intellectually simplistic plays, even Gunn’s tempered experimentation was treated as outlandish. The political aspects of the play, some of which MacIntyre also wanted to cut, as well as erotic elements, may have proved difficult, too.

The symbolic in “The Ancient Fire” almost as much as the ‘Unconscious’ scene represents an aspect of Gunn’s drama that sets it apart from the work of most of his Scottish contemporaries and it is this that is taken further in the one- act play *The Hawk’s Feather*.²⁸ In this play a brother and sister, Charlie and Flora, are showing a bothie to William, a self-made entrepreneur who is due to buy their land. While they are doing this a character, “The Visitor,” arrives at the hut. He resembles Charlie and is dressed like the Young Pretender. He regrets the past and wishes it to be put aside. Then his “Keeper,” a man who resembles William (who, we learn, is from Cumberland), arrives. The Keeper reveals that the Visitor is kept in an institution funded by Scottish benefactors with a Whiggish temperament, and then Keeper and Visitor leave. Charlie blows the candles out, and leaves, too. William, who, symbolically enough, has made his fortune from petrol lighters, lights one candle. Flora, hoping to keep the land in the family by marrying the prospective buyer, looks invitingly at William and the curtain descends.

The idea of the Institution, especially its association with a national mental illness, is ingenious, especially as it is never absolutely clear whether The Visitor is a real escaped patient with delusions or in fact a supernatural or surreal apparition. This blurring contributes to the play’s suspenseful nature, but also emphasises how ambiguously discomfiting the Bonnie Prince Charlie myth actually is. This aspect of the play walks the line (in my view, successfully) between contrivance and suspension of disbelief as the discussion of the murdered woman, Mary Stewart, had in *Glendaniel*. However, the foil for the Young Pretender myth—the contemporary characters Charlie, Flora, and William—makes the symbolic interpretation of the play the primary one. The significant names, and especially the use of recurrence—the transfer of military triumph (Culloden) to the contemporary triumph of the Cumberland magnate, with Flora’s prostituting

herself to retain any share in her own estate—produce a drama that is more wholly symbolic than any other play Gunn wrote.

Such self-consciousness is taken even further in *Choosing a Play*.²⁹ As the title suggests, the play is about drama itself. The main characters are a man and woman who are arguing over what play to put on for the forthcoming Community Drama Festival. The woman, Flora, prefers an historical Highland tragedy; the man, Don, favours a “kitchen comedy” in the Scots kailyard tradition. Don objects to seeing tartan on stage, arguing that it is an essentially comic element of costume for a serious play, while Flora sees kitchen comedy as stereotyping the Scot as “canny.” In a rousing finish, Flora eventually persuades Don and their Producer that they have been too complacent about the portrayal of Scotland on the stage.

Flora, in a way that is reminiscent of *The Lost Glen's* mimicking “Interlude,”³⁰ also questions the grounds on which Community Drama is based:

Here we are come to choose a play for the Festival, and you say the very spirit of the thing doesn't matter. I say it does. We're dealing with drama—not with a mild way of amusing well-fed people who have come to see us get ticked off by an adjudicator in a boiled shirt. Drama. That which lifts the mind and shows us to ourselves. Shows us ourselves and our race and—and—purifies us, as the old Greeks said. But we're frightened even to face ourselves. We want to play safe, to be amusing, to use a touch of colour, don't you know—oh chawming—or a costume piece—very pretty—so that Mrs County from the front row may say a few words about How the Community Drama Festival movement has grown in a perfectly marvellous mannah. I'm suah we are all deeply indebted to those simply wonderful people who have worked hard all through the winter to come and entertain us heah with their entertaining—their very entertaining—uh—performances (p. 126).

In fact, Flora turns out to be an adept at parodying elements of community drama, so that she delivers what amounts to a play-within-a-play in Scots as, hitting out at the canny Scots myth, anathema to Gunn and Grieve alike, she earnestly mimics the Kailyard plays she detests:

You sneer at poetic drama—but history has shown it to live and move in this land. The land where Scotsmen—the world's maddest fools—so often risked all for an ideal—and finally lost all to the canniest nation in Christendom. You have taken the greatness of this story, of this spirit, and—not even crucified it but—but stuffed it into—into—[*She sweeps to a chair and sits for a moment with bowed head. when she raises her head she is the kitchen wife in the kitchen comedy. She looks at DON*] Whit's wrang wi' ye. ... But it's no good sayin' that against yer faither. The joinery business is no' whit it was, an' he canna set ye up in a real wage. Ye're ower young to be thinkin' o' gettin' merried onywey. An' the lassie hersel', wi' her face pooder an' her bits o' coloured cloots, I'm saying nothin' against her, an' if ye fed her on porridge she might even fill oot, more unlikely things have happened; for her faither is that mean he canna add a bit auld suet to yer meat without chairgi' ye for it.... Don't ye talk back to me. Remember I'm ver mither! ... Who is it? Is she coming here?⁹ Mrs MacFadyen, is it? What'll she be wantin' noo?... Gossip! Ye ken fine I never gossip. Gossip indeed! An' wi' that auld runt o' a craitur. I'll pretend I'm gettin' the tea (pp.136-7).

Gunn's realisation that the Community Drama movement had not been long in reaching a state of atrophy (if its aims had ever been artistic) are illustrated by the fact that drama itself should be his subject here. He chose not to write for its apparently low expectations but, despite Flora's spirited championing of a poetic historical drama of the Highlands, decided against the grand tragic form “that purifies us”—indeed, there is a suggestion that he is parodying this in Flora's speech, too. Rather, his plays present Scotland's problems as artistic, economic, and mythical. His plays seek a framework for further art as they do for further political action. They are essentially plays demanding, pun intended, further acts.

Unfortunately, some of the plays suffer in this reader's view from Gunn's failure to incorporate convincing dialogue. Thus, in *Hail, Caledonian!*, almost the whole play is taken up by a discussion between rival socialists, one for hydroelectric power in the Highlands (Ewan) and one against (Tom). The result is what one character at the beginning jokingly calls “the Socratic method,” an interchange of opinions and, especially, facts:

TOM: The issue is quite simple and obvious, if you would only face it. We object to private ownership of what should be public works. The water power should be used in native industries, run by the people for the people. That's what we're fighting for. And you know in your bones that that's right.

EWAN: Of course I do. I agree with it absolutely. We'd throw the Caledonian Company to the devil—

if we could get a Socialist scheme instead. But the point is—there is no Socialist scheme. Now, as for these native industries—at least let us be fair. Isn't it a fact that, under this Bill, any local industry started up anywhere by anyone within the area of the Scheme would have first call on the electricity generated by the Company itself? So that if you wanted to start a tweed mill, or a wood-pulping concern, or a place for making horn spoons out of Glengarry antlers, or any other nice little dream of a business, the Company would be bound to supply you with electricity, and to supply it—at cost price. At present you cannot start such an industry because of the immense initial outlay before you can generate the electricity. Even with all the rateable value of the County behind them, the Inverness County Council couldn't face up to a scheme such as you have in this Bill. But under this Scheme, as I say, the electricity would be generated for you and you would have first call on it at cost price. Is not that the case?

TOM: Possibly. But we want to have a scheme of our own. And to hell with the Caledonian Company—even if it's a Scots company.

EWAN: Stout fellow! Little girls dream of getting presents of their own from Santa Claus. But in Fort William we're not interested in dreams, not as an economic proposition (p.120).

The presentation of facts was important in *Net Results* not merely for the purposes of Gunn's propaganda but as a means of asserting the fishermen's complex and conscious identities against the rationalisations of the banker. Here, however, the argument for hydro-electricity is surely supplied by Gunn for the sole requirement of informing the audience. The play's primary role is to teach and to persuade—the Socrates joke is not just a joke. The plot is simply a political discussion brought to an end by the barkeeper calling time. It is social criticism with little wish to portray the psychological nature of its dramatis personae or to work on any other of the levels one normally expects from drama, or indeed from Gunn.

If this succeeds on the terms the play seems to establish for itself, faults arise in the other plays not because of ideological intent but because of selfcontradiction. I mentioned earlier the caricaturing of the music-collector in *Old Music*. In fact, with the exception of William in *The Hawk's Feather* every English character in Gunn's drama has his or her language peppered with phrases such as “Phew,” “By gad,” “You chaps,” “Cheero,” [for “Cheers”], and “Bally,” comic phrases satirically used of course but perpetuating English stereotypes nevertheless. More serious, though rarer, in some plays Gunn's didacticism gets the better of him and he supplies an ending which, uncharacteristic in the plays as a whole, rather than just showing the contradictions of Scottish patriotism, tries to remold sentimental feelings into more practical even radical ones. Because Gunn does not want to rid himself of all the Scottish icons—rather he wants to remake them for something more useful—his appeals to pride in traditional cultural baggage, such as tartan or legendary personal qualities in the Scottish personality, can read uncomfortably. For example, Flora in *Choosing a Play*, stirs the lead participants in the community drama with the speech:

That's the spirit. Smash the furniture. Do anything wild or mad or splendid—but never give in. Remember, never give in—or you're lost. Never, never let us give in. The old Scots spirit of adventure and courage and the great cause. Forward! (p. 140)

At this, the producer's wife and her son begin singing “March! March! Ettrick and Teviotdale” and, as they take up a tartan shawl, are accompanied by the producer himself with clenched fist “as if inspiration had got him at last” (p. 140). The curtain then falls.

It could be argued that Gunn is here presenting a dialectic—between the kitchen comedy and the historical drama—and in so doing is standing back somewhat from the rousing element on which the play finishes. Flora could be portrayed in a way that would satirise her own stance—an actual production of the play could, I think, offer an interpretation either way. However, the mere fact that the play does end in this way contributes, as the earlier favourable depiction of Flora does, to the suggestion that Gunn approves of it in spirit. Flora's energy, if not the way that she channels and expresses it, has an affinity with the author's own wish to recognise the value in Scottish history and use that to change the present. The question of how to use that energy constructively is still open.

Similarly, *The BridgeBuilder* has a “stiff-upper-lip” ending which may seem sentimental today. Here, the hero of the play is the chief engineer Melford, modelled on the true-life bridge builder Thomas Telford, but interestingly stripped of historic detail so that the play, ominously, could be taking place in the here and now. At the close of the play, his bridge just mined by “enemy agents,” Melford converses with this subordinates, Cameron and Davidson:

CAMERON (*uncertain*): Will this now mean—that we are being paid off, that that the work will stop?

MELFORD (*with quiet if intense deliberation*): The work will never stop. The blind and bloody forces of the world can destroy and destroy and destroy: but we'll build and build and build.

CAMERON (*after a moment, with conviction*): Sir, if you speak to the men like that, they'll be with you.

MELFORD: Some of them, Mr Cameron. True men like yourself. (CAMERON goes hurriedly out. MELFORD looks over the table and picks up a blueprint as if going about his business. DAVIDSON watches him.) It has taken the enemy to see the importance of our work, Mr Davidson. A nice compliment.

DAVIDSON: Ay. It's what you might call a shattering compliment. But there are whiles these days when I think God has gone deaf.

MELFORD: The architecture of the universe was no inconsiderable feat. Before adventuring on its criticism, we should possibly remember that we have a long leeway to make up. (*Rolls print and puts it under his arm.*)

DAVIDSON: Are you going out—now?

MELFORD: Yes. We must go out and see what damage has been done, and make our arrangements for clearing away all obstructions.

DAVIDSON: Are you-going ahead on the bridge—at once?

MELFORD: We have got to build the bridge, haven't we?

DAVIDSON: Yes ... yes ... but it's war [...]

MELFORD: If you mean our fight against the forces of unreason is only beginning, you are right. But we go on. We go on. They may be deaf to our plans. They may destroy us. But—the bridge will be built. (*They face each other. DAVIDSON'S head droops in a nod of grim acceptance and satisfaction.*) Come, let us go. (*As they go out*)—

CURTAIN (p. 140).

Published just after the outbreak of war, with candid commentary on the contempt of central government for the regions, and on the manipulation of public works contracts by landowners asking for over-the-odds purchase payments, the play is not as idealistic as this rhetoric might seem to imply. Rather Melford's passion for literally constructive enterprise is placed in opposition to humankind's destructiveness, with the suggestion that it will indeed triumph. Davidson's bringing in of the question of divine will as a question which war raises most forcefully is also, interestingly, an anticipation of the religious questions asked in *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*. Nevertheless, Gunn could have ended the play with much more reticence. Melford is making a speech rather than speaking to Cameron and Davidson. Cameron clearly responds favourably to this—"Sir, if you speak to the men like that, they'll be with you"—and it was, I would argue, Gunn's hope that his audience would be too. The sense of portentousness, for myself at least, remains.

Other examples of poor dialogue punctuate the plays, including those which avoid a speechified conclusion, and it is on this—after all, the primary means of communication in drama—that Gunn's drama wobbles. Grieve's early comments about two unnamed plays suggested that Gunn had not fully understood the multi-media nature of the stage:

Your two plays—I like them both—in a way. Even in a literary sense, however, I do not think they're quite in final form—I think they can come through a great deal further. But what I've been mainly troubled about is with them from a purely producer's or actor's point of view. Technically they won't do—they say too much (drama can dispense with *so* much verbiage—gesture, posture, etc. facial expression, and so forth are all auxiliary means of expression which render so many words superfluous—how often in real life do we complete a sentence?—it is only necessary in 9 cases out of 10 to start a sentence, and it completes itself in our faces, etc.). You say too much—on the other hand (I'm thinking mainly of the three-act play—you don't say enough—to clarify the intended underlying action—it doesn't transpire—clogged with words that do not advance it.³¹

Gunn makes his plays do much of their work through dialogue, and debating dialogue at that, and he is generally less interested in plot or action unless they have symbolic importance. This can be seen as the result of political and didactic concerns smothering rather than integrating with artistic ones—in spite of the care he takes in directing the actors away from the damaging models of the prevailing Scottish drama. Alternatively (and I want to admit this alternative), we can read this as a drama of ideas where Grieve's wish for realism—despite his counter-realism comments quoted earlier in this chapter—for dialogue to be patterned on speech as it is spoken in ordinary life—is inappropriate.

In this latter way Gunn's interest in drama can be read as deliberately suggestive of a future drama, as it is suggestive of new political possibilities for Scotland. Rather than creating that drama, or those possibilities, his plays strive to clear the ground for future work—when *Choosing a Play* was reviewed by a community drama judge, Dennis Arundell, he wrote that it “amusingly tears to pieces community drama and adjudicators (every adjudicator ought to be forced to study this with tears—and laughs).”³² Gunn presents arguments, cases; he sketches and debates.

Unlike his novels, which are marked by their fusion of depicted psychological states, the emotional realism that takes the reader right into the head and senses of Gunn's characters, his plays are in general less concerned with individual psychology. Similarly, Gunn's gifted story-telling is to some extent lost in the dwindled narrative interest of the plays. However, in 1935, the playwright O. H. Mavor (“James Bridie”) felt that in novels like *Sun Circle* and *Butcher's Broom* Gunn had shown himself too personally involved in his subject, and that drama gave him a chance to do more artistically sound work. Gunn had been writing drama for some ten years, so Mavor, an involved supporter of his plays, had a fair range of his work on which to base what might now be seen as an extraordinary judgment: “I think the theatre is the place for you. You are not tied up in it by the invisible ends of your own guilty soul, but by silly restrictions that you can see & get round.”³³

One way of de-personalising one's work, of circumnavigating one's own “guilty” soul is to throw off voices—to distance oneself from one's characters—and to make formal gambles. Gunn's experience with the mild experimentation in “The Ancient Fire,” however, may have suggested to him, rightly or wrongly, that Scottish audiences were simply too backward in their knowledge of art of that kind (though this is not to say in art of other kinds, for example folk song) to appreciate all but the most obvious of techniques. “The Ancient Fire” may even have been the three-act play which Grieve found oblique. For Gunn there was a need to state and re-state Scotland's political and artistic problems: the form of rational debate rather than more subtle dramatic effects seems to have been one way of presenting problems clearly in an unashamedly didactic way. The cultural infrastructure—mainly consisting of community drama and a single serious theatre group which could not afford to allow its playwrights time and even critical failures to develop—could not be said to be conducive to any playwright's success in Scotland. In 1938, prompted to write about the establishment of a “Theatre Society of Scotland,”³⁴ Gunn certainly saw the situation as dire:

... we need a theatre ... to which Scottish writers may bring their conceptions of life, born out of heredity and environment peculiarly their own. These conceptions may be defeatist, disruptive, rebellious, constructive, but at least they would refer to elements of conflict in our own country that are profoundly real, from the tragic and heroic sea-fisheries of the north to the desperate industrialism of the south, from the Highland glen to the Lowland farm, with all the vital inter-play of character and thought and aspiration such scenes inevitably imply, for portrayal through the essential Scottish conception of fantasy, comedy, and tragedy. At present a Scottish writer has no theatre to which he can take any such drama. Just as his country suffers from having no focal point, no vitalising heart, so the native playwright suffers, in this single element of the drama, from having no central stage, no national theatre, to which he may bring the fruits of his talent and have them read and judged as drama, not as hopeful commercial efforts at understudying the London stage. Even in the immense growth of the Community Drama Festival Movement, he has proved to himself already that only a certain type of play is preferred for competitive purposes. To a large degree it has become a game of acquiring marks, and the more cunning amateurs have become expert at the game (p.198).

Gunn's drama, in infiltrating what drama scene there was, including the newcomer of radio broadcasting, in using it for intellectual and political concerns, and in attempting some more adventurous techniques within that small circumference, asks for a revision of the history of the Scottish drama of this century. In a surely disingenuous but nevertheless tantalising remark, Gunn went on to hint in “The Theatre Society of Scotland,” that the choice he made between writing novels and writing plays was not so clear-cut as we might have expected.

What the Scottish playwright, who feels he may have something to say or to evoke, needs is a theatre, run by professional players, to whom he can entrust the expression of adult thought and irony and imagination. Without such a theatre he is crippled in expression or simply does not write plays at all and turns to some other medium, like the novel (p.198).

In one sense, at least, we can be grateful that Scotland's dramatic infrastructure in the first half of the century was so poor. If it had been at all adequate we may have lost one of our finest novelists.

The British Library