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Modern Scottish Short Stories

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Fred Urquhart and Giles Gordon


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Modern Scottish Short Stories

Introduction by Fred Urquhart

Scots have been pioneers in many fields. They have been in the vanguard in medicine, education, engineering and shipbuilding, as settlers in Canada and New Zealand, and as mercenaries in the armies of Europe from the Middle Ages onwards. In these and many other adventurous enterprises they have received due recognition and have been either praised or blamed for their spirit, bravery, toughness or sang-froid. Yet there is one field in which scant recognition has been given them. And that is the art of the short story.

The best stories spring from unbridled imagination. The Scots have always had that. They have always lied with panache. Early signs of the scope of Scottish imagination are to be found in the legends of the Highlands and Islands, told once upon a time around the peat fires, and in the stirring, romantic cadences of the Border Ballads. 'Art—and the ballads are often great art—does not come into being from popular excitement, but from the inspiration of a particular gifted individual: it cannot be syndicated and socialized,' wrote E. W. Edmunds in *A History of English Literature* edited by John Buchan, published in 1923. 'The doctrine of the extreme antiquity of the original minstrel seems to be contradicted by the facts before us. . . . The probability is that most of the ballads were fashioned in the sixteenth century by minstrels who summed up a long ancestry of popular poetry, as in Burns culminated a long tradition of Scottish vernacular song.'

Whether ballads like *Otterburn*, *The Bonnie Earl o' Moray* and *The Wife of Usher's Well* were composed by one hand or several, they have had an important influence not only on Scottish literature but on the culture of the entire English speaking people. From this source the imaginative stream of Scottish fiction eventually flowed; it took some time to start because the Scots, a dogmatic and complacent race, were keener to glorify themselves in philosophy and theology, feeling that any kind of fiction or poetry was the work of the Devil. Their canting covenanting is responsible for much Scottish fiction, when at last it was allowed to emerge into the open, after disentangling itself from the clammy clutches of the Kirk, being concerned with the supernatural.

Early in the nineteenth century readers were able to turn thankfully from theological catechisms and rantings to the long-short stories of Walter Scott, John Galt and James Hogg, whom Douglas Gifford calls 'the last representative of the ballad tradition'. Then, early in Victoria's reign, came the popular series of Wilson's *Tales of the Borders*. From that time the long-short story developed in different ways in the work of George Macdonald, William Black, W. E. Aytoun, Margaret Oliphant, S. R. Crockett, Neil Munro, Robert Louis Stevenson, J. M. Barrie, R. B. Cunningham Graham and John Buchan until by the beginning of the twentieth century there was what might be called a thriving industry of Scottish storytellers whose work was read and enjoyed by a great number of readers far beyond the Scottish borders.

The industry still thrives. Twentieth-century practitioners of the art include people as contrasting in style, outlook and subject matter as Neil M. Gunn, Eric Linklater, Naomi Mitchison, Edward Gaitens, Muriel Spark, George Friel and George Mackay Brown. And we must not forget that Arthur Conan Doyle, member of an Irish Roman Catholic family, born in Edinburgh and educated at its university, was the author of the Sherlock Holmes stories, which have probably had a greater number of readers than most short stories published in the past one hundred years.

Nor should we forget the Scottish influence on the literature of other countries. Pauline Smith, who wrote *The Little Karoo* and other marvellous stories of the South African veld, was the daughter of an Aberdeenshire woman and she published her first work, which dealt with Scottish life, in *The Aberdeen Free Press*. Margaret Laurence, Canada's best writer of short stories and novels, is of Scottish stock. Scots words and phrases crop up in the stories of William Faulkner and Eudora Welty of the American Deep South. And Whit Burnett, founder and publisher and editor of the internationally famous American magazine *Story*, devoted to what Frank O'Connor, a great storyteller himself, has called 'the lonely voice of the short story writer', was so proud of his Scottish forebears that he wrote a novella about Robert Burns (who may have been an ancestor) which took up one whole issue of his magazine.

At the risk of being accused of chauvinism—and this would be funny seeing that I have lived for more than half my life in England and am by no means a thistle-wielding Scots Nationalist—I must say that I believe many Scottish short story writers of today display infinitely more gusto, passion, rumbustiousness and vigour than some of their English contemporaries.

Yet, despite this vigour and its possible influence on other cultures, the Scots themselves are neglected in most modern studies of the short story. Although invariably there are copious references to their

Irish and Welsh contemporaries, few Scots are obviously judged to be worthy of inclusion. In three studies of the short story on my desk, only around half a dozen Scottish names appear, and two of these, Scott and Stevenson, are not signalled out for their Scottishness but for their influence on English literature. The name of Lewis Grassie Gibbon does not appear; indeed, few English literary text-books mention him. Grassie Gibbon wrote only a handful of short stories, but his novels, especially his *Howe o' the Mearns* trilogy, *A Scots Quair*, have had tremendous influence on the generations that followed his. Saki (Hector Hugh Munro) is mentioned in all these studies, but briefly, and none of the authors take the trouble to say (perhaps they didn't know) that Saki belonged to a Scottish family with long Anglo-Indian military connections, and that once, when visiting Edinburgh with his aunt, she complained of the absence of baps on the breakfast table in much the same bewildered way as I now complain of the absence of Scottish names in the indexes of studies of the short story.

Giles Gordon and I hope that this anthology of twenty-nine Scottish stories will remedy such a sorry state of affairs and encourage authors of future studies of 'the lonely voice' to take a broader view. All these stories were written and published in the past forty years, so they are reasonably representative of what is being written in Scotland today. Six of the authors are dead. The twenty-three still alive are capable of defending their own work. I will say only a few words about the ones who are gone.

Margaret Hamilton's story gives one side of shipbuilding life on the Clyde, Edward Gaitens's gives another. Each died without receiving proper recognition for their contribution to Scottish letters. Besides short stories, each published a novel. Margaret Hamilton's *Bull's Penny* spans a man's life from childhood on the Island of Arran to his death in the poorhouse. It is remarkable for the raciness of its language; she had a wonderful command of dialect, especially the old half-forgotten words. Edward Gaitens's *Dance of the Apprentices* is about the Macdonnell family who live in a Gorbals tenement from before the 1914-18 war to its aftermath. Gaitens too wrote realistic dialogue, and his characters are bursting with vitality and Glasgow 'gallusness'.

The stories and novels of another Glasgow author, George Friel, were admired by many people, but his work never achieved the wider acclaim it deserved. His short stories should be collected in one volume by an enterprising publisher.

Neil M. Gunn, Eric Linklater and James Kennaway all became famous in their lifetime. Gunn and Linklater were primarily novelists, but each also wrote many first class short stories. James Kennaway, killed in a car accident at the height of his success, wrote only a few

short stories in his early days. For various reasons, none of these seemed right for this book. But I gathered from a conversation I had with him several years before his death that *The Complexion of The Colonel* was conceived first as a short story. That he turned it eventually into the first chapter of the novel *Tunes of Glory* is neither here nor there, and we make no apologies for including it. It is a perfect short story, and it depicts a side of Scottish life that we wanted to show.

Before leaving the book to the reader's own judgement, I want to say that there is a passage in H. E. Bates's *The Modern Short Story* which has some bearing on what I've said about Scottish influence. Bates pays tribute to Constance Garnett's 'sensitivity gently tempered with Scots caution' when she started her translations from the Russian, and adds: 'Without Constance Garnett's genius and astonishing industry in translating Turgenev, Tolstoy, Gogol, Dostoevsky, Gorki and Tchekhov, the history of twentieth-century English literature, notably that of the short story and the drama, must inevitably have been a different thing.'

NOTE ON DIALECT

Dialect is often an excuse for people not reading Scottish fiction. Scots writers who use dialect, students and readers who are neither lazy nor prejudiced should heed the words of Matthew Arnold who, in the late Victorian era, wrote:

'I have seen advertised *The Primer of American Literature*. Imagine the face of Philip or Alexander at hearing of a primer of Macedonian Literature! Are we to have a Primer of Canadian Literature too, and a Primer of Australian? We are all contributaries to one great literature—English literature. The contribution of Scotland to this literature is far more serious and important than that of America has yet had time to be; yet a *Primer of Scotch* (sic) *Literature* would be an absurdity.'

They should not heed people like the editor of a well-known literary periodical who, turning down a story by Fred Urquhart, once wrote: 'You will not be mollified if I say that part of the reason—indeed, a great part of it—is that I know I have a stubborn resistance to dialect (you might use another word) in prose or verse.' He was certainly honest, but we wonder what he would have done if he had been offered stories by Thomas Hardy, Emily Brontë, and Mary Webb, each of whom, at times, wrote different kinds of English dialect in their fiction?

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NEIL M. GUNN

The Ghost's Story

I WAS NEVER a fighting man, said the ghost; yet for seventeen years I fought in the wars over the broad back of Scotland, from the glens and the moors to the low lands that spread themselves out far south of the waters of the Forth. But in all that great country there was no land so bonnie to me as my own land, the Laigh of Moray. My forefathers had been on that land for generations going far back beyond the coming of the Danes, and sometimes indeed my blood told me that they had been there for ever.

It was the year 1297, for that was the year I got married. The name of the girl I married was Janet Gordon, and she could have married anyone in all that countryside, but for some reason of her own she married me. We had our cottage and our bit of land, our small head of stock, and the outrun on the moor. She was nineteen and I was twenty-two. It was like being at the beginning of the world.

Now often enough there were wars, and chiefs would raise their men and march away with them on some wild foray. There were lads in my land who were fond of adventure. But the great bulk of us did not care for fighting. That's the way it always was. But now something strange began to happen to that land, and because it happened to that land it happened to us.

Our country had been conquered by the English. They had marched through the length and breadth of it, through all the bonnie lands of Moray, and had put garrisons in the strong castles and fortified places. Sir Andrew de Moray, who was the overlord of our land, was shut up in an English prison.

Well—so it was. But what, at the end of the day, had that to do with us? Some of our cattle had been lifted and some damage done; but far more damage had been done many a time in a clan fight, as the tales told. The lords of the castles fought, and their fighting always boded ill for us. Let them fight.

But now, as I say, something strange began to happen in that land. The name of Sir Andrew's son, young Andrew, was whispered from one mouth to another, from one tree to another; you heard it in the sound of the river water, it lay in the throat like a salmon in the throat of a pool. I fell silent, thinking of that name. And all the time like a voice in the night it called: Come!

It was not the beauty of my wife Janet that had troubled the minds of men, it was her spirit, the way she bore herself under her bracken-bronze hair: it was her eyes. And she hated war.

'This is different,' I said to her.

'Ay, it's always different,' she answered. 'And it's always the same. The great lairds call you to their private tulzies and you go like sheep, and like sheep are killed.'

'No,' I said, 'it's not the same. The greatest lairds in Scotland, the highest nobles, side with the English and sit fast in their lands. Moray could do the same. By rising now against the English, he is risking everything, including his own father's life. Like you and me, he is newly wed; and maybe he loves his wife as I love mine.'

At that her anger against me increased. She drew her own picture of the state of Scotland in the grip of the English, with Scottish war lords supporting the English rule, and, behind that, the whole might of England herself. What chance did we think we had—we, a handful of simple Moray loons, against such powers? But though the flame of her scorn irked me a little, I replied as truthfully as I could, saying, 'I think we have nearly as good a chance as the snowflake has in hell.'

After that, for two days we hardly spoke a word. During the seventeen years that followed I never again experienced so hard a time as that time. Moray's voice spoke now not from the trees and the river and the wind, but up out of the land I walked on, until I knew it was no longer Moray's voice that called me, but the voice of the land itself. I looked at the land, this land of ours, this land. Then . . . I found . . . I could not look at it.

That night suddenly, and for no reason I could see, Janet gave way, and buried her face against me, and wept.

'You will go,' she said at last, 'you will go, and I will go with you.'

All through the night we talked of it and I tried to persuade her to wait for me, to wait at home. But now that the hard wall of her anger had been swept away, she was full of a light fun, and teased me, and mocked me, and did many a queer thing besides. It was no unusual thing for women to follow their men to war. Women were the camp-makers. They cooked the food and attended to the wounded, and left the men free to forage and to fight. And Janet had always been curious about herbs and growing things, for her grandmother had great skill amongst them.

So it came about that one fine evening in the middle of May, Janet and I walked into the camp of the men of Moray. I smile sometimes to myself when I think of that odd gathering of country lads with little but a bow and a bunch of arrows to their back, and the handful of women who were sometimes with them and sometimes

not. For their aim was not to defend their simple homes against a gang of freebooters, but to go forth and take great castles and reduce strong garrisons, to turn aside thundering cavalry charges, to defeat armies, and finally to smash the mail-clad chivalry of all England and drive the English from our Scottish lands. One might well say, looking at the matter calmly, that the snowflake had the better chance.

Yet one new thing there was in that little camp, perhaps, for the first time in all Europe. And it was this: it was a meeting of the common people, a rising of the folk themselves, determined to win back freedom from the hand of the conqueror, to win back the freedom, not of Moray, not of Galloway, not of any one place, but of all Scotland—of Scotland, their own native land. It was a strange, fitful thing, this spirit, but it would not let us rest; a haunting, powerless thing that drove us on. Yet nameless as it was, time proved that in the end only one force could defeat it, and that force was death.

Now, because of this spirit among us, we in that company were often a happy band. In fighting for the freedom of our own land we found freedom in ourselves. From Moray we passed to Inverness. Our band grew. Young Andrew raised the standard at Avoch. The English nobles met in the castle of Inverness to see how best to destroy us. With Andrew at our head, and an Inverness burgess as next in command, we ambushed Fitzwarine of Castle Urquhart on his way home from the meeting with his escort of troops. It was my first fight. In Inverness I had gotten a long spear. Never before had I encountered a mail-clad man, but many a horse had I ridden. I made the horse rear so suddenly on that broken ground that he heaved right over and pinned his rider to the ground. Fitzwarine and a few of his escort were lucky to get away. It was our first fight, and we had won! We laid siege to the castle itself. In the dark we tackled its walls. But it was too strong for us. The Countess of Ross, who was on the side of the English, managed to send provisions to the garrison. We lifted the siege and turned our attentions to the Countess. And so the war for freedom started.

If I harp on this word freedom, it was because we soon found that the spirit that had moved us was everywhere wakening in Scotland. In July we were back in Moray, but not yet strong enough to meet an armed force sent against us from Aberdeen. We let it pass. But now, behind it, Aberdeen rose. And down in the forests of Selkirk, Wallace was waiting with his men. There were risings and there were capitulations. But ever and always Moray in the north and Wallace in the south held on. Their power grew. Castles fell before them. Within six weeks from that same July the men of Moray looked down from the Rock of Stirling upon an English army that was ten

thousand strong. The moment had come at last. The fights and the skirmishes were over.

You know how the battle went: how the Scots won, and how Wallace followed the fleeing enemy to the border. But not Andrew of Moray, for he had led the way into the heart of the battle. I had seen him go down. Oh, desperately we fought, a little ring of us, over his body. Janet, running, met us as we bore him from the field. She said he was not dead, and she made us lay him down, and there and then she dealt with him according to her skill.

He lived long enough to know that Scotland was free. His name first, and Wallace's next, were put in documents of State; and then he died.

Back in the Laigh of Moray, we thought the wars were over. They had hardly yet begun. England gathered all her strength, set her intrigues going at home and abroad, and marched her forces north once more. Wallace was defeated at Falkirk and became a fugitive, hiding in his woods of the south.

Edward came again, and came to Moray, and near and far he laid our bonnie lands waste. For six weeks he sat between Kinloss and Lochindorb when the birches were turning yellow, and from there sent his armies to the taking of all the great castles in the north.

For seven bloody years after our victory at Stirling Bridge, Scotland suffered as surely she had never suffered before. She was so beaten down, with all her great lords Edward's men once more, so trampled upon and overcome, that it seemed never in the history of the world could she breathe the word freedom again. I looked at Janet and wondered, but she said no word. Our first son was now six years old, and our second son was three. She had won back from the hunted woods to our little place, and I had joined her there. Was it the end of fighting now for me? She said no word. That was in the month of September in the year 1305. I can remember the evening, for a lovely quiet evening it was. My care for Janet had grown with the years. I should stay with her, for a new birth was near to her; and the bonnie woods and the land. . . . It was in the quiet of the evening the man came to our door. I looked at his desperate face. 'Wallace,' he said, 'Wallace—has been beheaded in London town as a traitor—and his body torn asunder.'

The news froze our hearts and all the outside world, so that for a time everything was still as death. So still the birch trees were, you would think they grew in eternity. Never in my mortal life did I know so stricken a moment as that moment.

We spoke little. The man went on his way. And that night, out of a great quietness, Janet said to me: 'Tomorrow you will go, but this time I cannot go with you.'

And on the morrow I went, slipping through the woods to join

with the hunted men. And as I went I knew why Edward had murdered Wallace and torn his body apart with the bloody hatred that no wolf knows. He had done it because of this thing, this new thing, which had been in Wallace's heart, which was in the hearts of all the hunted men and women of Scotland. Great lords he could buy and sell according to the rules of that chivalry of which he was the head. But this new thing, this love of our land, this love in the heart of the common folk, this love of freedom, this thing he could neither buy nor sell, and so he feared it.

As I went on my way, I saw Wallace again as I saw him before Stirling, and I called his name, and I wept. There in that wood I made my vow to myself—to hold by the struggle till Scotland's freedom was won, or to die.

There followed years of such adventure that the telling would take nights without end. You will have heard how Bruce was hunted by man and by beast, and how often his escape seemed half a miracle. His wife and daughter were torn from holy sanctuary at Tain by the Earl of Ross and sent prisoners to Edward; just as the son that had been born to the widow of young Andrew of Moray, a few months after his death at Stirling, had been caught and sent to England, too.

But through all these terrible years the thing that Edward feared did not die. Watered by tears and blood, it grew. It grew, and grew stronger; and at last, seventeen long years after the battle of Stirling Bridge, I was once again a spearman in an army, gazing down on the might of England, this time at that place where the Bannock Burn runs into the Forth.

In men they outnumbered us by three to one, and in war-arms they outdid us still more. On the first day I was one of Randolph's men, one of that schiltrom of spears against which the cavalry of Clifford and Beaumont broke as great waves break on rocks. The spears that could not be broken, until the schiltrom broke of itself to pursue the flying horsemen.

But the main armies did not engage that day, and at night Bruce left it with our leaders whether we should fight on the morrow or, against such desperate odds, more prudently retire. But all the leaders and all the army cried out to fight, and fight they did.

It was a sunny daybreak in the middle of June in the year 1314 when the Scots went forward to the attack. Before we reached the English lines, we kneeled for a moment. At that, there was a shout from the English, who thought we were kneeling to them. I was in the centre, under Randolph, and after our right had been engaged under Edward Bruce, we held steadily against the main body.

It was a desperate battle, that battle, and we fought on grimly without a word, without a cry. But what drove the battle in our