Chapter

Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Women

*Glenda Norquay*

*A Scots Quair*, Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s most famous work, is striking in its engagement with that ‘difference of value’ identified by Virginia Woolf in 1928 as a key issue for women writers.[[1]](#endnote-1) The interest in strong female characters, the focus on female friendships as well as male-female relationships, an attention to the rhythms of women’s lives, the articulation of dangerous questions around sexuality and contraception and, above all, in the character of Chris Guthrie, the centering voice of a female consciousness, combine to present a significant challenge to the literary politics of gender. When Gibbon’s contemporary Helen B. Cruickshank first read *Sunset Song* she believed it to be written by a woman, perceived feminine traits in the writing and described her mother’s own enthusiasm for the novel.[[2]](#endnote-2) More recently, feminist critic Deirdre Burton notes that when reading the trilogy she had to remind herself it was not written by a ‘modern female writer, who wrote from women’s cultural experience’.[[3]](#endnote-3) Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s fiction appears then to speak for and to its women readers; in his other writing, as James Leslie Mitchell, the author’s interest in sexual politics is just as evident. Yet, while the radicalism of Mitchell’s novels receives little attention in accounts of Scottish feminist writing, both feminist and nationalist critiques of his fiction as Gibbon have asked difficult questions about the representation of women, his deployment of female characters and the gendered implications of his literary forms. This chapter explores the complicated dynamics of the relationship between J. Leslie Mitchell, Lewis Grassic Gibbon and women, assessing his engagement with feminism, debates around his representation of female experience and the wider politics of his writing, and concludes by comparing his writing to female writers from north-east Scotland.

Whether because of a personal fascination, the centrality to his life of an intellectually dynamic marriage, or a recognition that women in this period serve to embody the modern moment and therefore presented the richest subject for fiction, both the novels of James Leslie Mitchell and the fiction of Lewis Grassic Gibbon operate through a particularly powerful attention to women and women’s issues. His fiction displays a keen engagement with the preoccupations of feminist thinking at the time and in particular with links between sexual oppression, birth control and marriage as emotional and economic exploitation. In *The Thirteenth Disciple*, a 1931 James Leslie Mitchell novel which flirts with the semi-autobiographical, the central character, Malcom Maudslay, initiates the founding of a radical ‘politico-social society’. Although its members can barely agree about the society’s intentions they produce an eleven-point plan with the first three aims directed to addressing the position of women: ‘Abolition of the Legal Status of Marriage; State Propaganda and Enforcement of Birth Control; a General Tax to be levied for the Endowment of Each Woman’s First Two Children’.[[4]](#endnote-4) Rather than adopting the language of equal rights and constitutional representation which had informed the women’s suffrage campaigns, in their challenge to the deeper economic underpinnings of oppression Mitchell’s imagined radicals hearken back to early twentieth-century feminist thinkers such as Cicely Hamilton in *Marriage as a Trade* (1909) and Olive Schreiner in *Women and Labour* (1911), both of whom give historical context to the conditions in which women are forced into ‘parasitism’. Like his character Maudslay, Mitchell was particularly exercised by the oppression of women through the burden of child-bearing, a consistent theme in his fiction. As the suicide in *Sunset Song* of Chris Guthrie’s mother on finding that she is again pregnant suggests, he recognised the psychological and economic damage created by an absence of birth control. The majority of his novels in one way or another present the case for its liberating effect, a point most explicit in *Cloud Howe* in which Else the housekeeper ‘listened with red-tinted ears, and stammered and blushed’ at the advice given by Chris to avoid further pregnancies.[[5]](#endnote-5) The complaint of Cicely Hamilton, that women are regarded ‘not as a human being with certain physical and mental qualities which enable her to bring children into the world and cook a dinner, but as a breeding-machine and the necessary adjunct to a frying pan’, echoes throughout his writing.[[6]](#endnote-6)

Gibbon also makes the more radical case for women to be understood as active in their sexuality. Not only are female characters in his realist novels, such as Chris Guthrie and her prototype Thea Mayven (*Stained Radiance*), shown as taking the sexual initiative, but Mitchell uses his fantasy fiction to present, in the most positive terms possible, a world of sexual freedom. The utopian society explored in the scientific fantasy *Three Go Back* both suggests a primitive ideal in which women have equal freedom in their choice of sexual partner − ‘They mated as they chose, those golden women’ − and depicts contemporary women as less hindered by the conventional moralities which induce shame in their male counterparts.[[7]](#endnote-7) While the two men within the group of time travellers resist the mating rituals of their new world, central consciousness Clair Stranlay finds liberation:

A lover of the dark days! A lover dead and dust twenty-five thousand years before she had been born! What dream was this that had led her feet from a Kensington flat to that running across the hills from the mating place of the dawn men?[[8]](#endnote-8)

The focus on women in his fiction is also used to sustain a wider left-wing analysis of power.[[9]](#endnote-9) In ‘Forsaken’, a Gibbon short story in which Christ is imagined returning to an Aberdeen household, the perspective of Jess Gordon, abused and sexually exploited by her employer, serves as one of the most powerful indictments of the ‘fallen’ world in which this figure finds himself: ‘But she couldn’t do anything else, she’d her job to hold on to, lot of use to find herself sacked, on the Broo, and father with work only now and then […]’[[10]](#endnote-10) Economic deprivation, social injustice and sexual oppression create a dark triangle in which the woman is most centrally imprisoned. Mitchell’s ‘The Road’ is even more explicitly political: set in Egypt, this short story shows British woman Jane Hatoun organising a Women’s League of Al-Islam and eventually sacrificing her life for the future of other women.[[11]](#endnote-11) Through exploring oppression in a specific context the author articulates a broader critique of social structures which bear heavily upon, and yet are most explicitly challenged by, women.

While the author’s social agenda may lead to depictions of women as victims of sexual and economic oppression, these are outweighed by compelling images of a strong and challenging femininity. The situation of women at the centre of his fiction allows full exploration of female experience but also of the ways in which it is possible to triumph over constraints. There are, however, significant differences in how this is achieved in Gibbon’s ‘Scottish’ and Mitchell’s ‘non-Scottish’ work. Identifying Mitchell’s fiction as explicitly more political, Keith Dixon notes that its central female characters tend to be middle class and articulate a fuller political understanding.[[12]](#endnote-12) Characters such as Domina Riddoch in *The Thirteenth Disciple*, Clair Stranlay in *Three Go Back*, Gay Hunter in the novel of that name and Thea in *Stained Radiance* all present lively, intelligent characters who express a relatively monologic interrogation of dominant gender roles and sexual mores. In that sense they appear as ‘exceptional’. Yet these bold women – with the exception perhaps of Thea Mayven, who is more clearly a product of conflicts between her Scottish roots and her London existence and more contradictorily driven by needs for romance and for independence − appear fully formed in their consciousness of a desire to challenge societal norms and in their confidence to enact that challenge. Domina, Gay, Clair and even Ester Caldon in *Image and Superscription* face adventures, but from the outset of each novel their status as ‘new’ women is never in doubt.[[13]](#endnote-13) In the fantasy fiction in particular the imperative of each plot is towards constructing a world in which this innovative sense of self might find its fullest articulation. Indeed, the impossibility of accommodating a reconciliation between the vision of a brave new woman and a critique of the tired old world may suggest why, after *Stained Radiance*, Mitchell increasingly entered the domains of science fiction and fantasy.

Gibbon’s fiction, inherently less explicit than Mitchell’s in articulating a manifesto and drawing the reader much more powerfully into identification with characters and scenes, still deploys female characters as a means of envisaging alternative worlds. As *A Scots Quair* and short stories such as ‘Smeddum’demonstrate,characters drawn by Gibbon are more likely to produce a woman-centred empathy with realms of female experience and the ways in which women negotiate the demands of their worlds. The characters themselves are less one-dimensionally ‘exceptional’; combining both ‘representative’ and unique qualities, they are also more clearly defined by the demands of a specific social reality. Gibbon is, however, consistently alert to the complexity of this dynamic. In ‘Smeddum’ he created in Meg Menzies an ‘exceptional’ figure, who apparently challenges gender roles in a relatively stereotypical way: she is strong, forceful, works like a man and runs the household instead of her partner, Will: ‘She did half his work in the Tocherty parks, she’d yoke up the horse and the sholtie together, and kilt up her skirts till you’d see her great legs, and cry *Wissh!* like a man and turn a fair drill’.[[14]](#endnote-14) Yet, while the community around her perceives Meg’s challenge as in this inversion of gender roles, her real radicalism is revealed at the story’s conclusion when she acknowledges that she had never married Will and could not make up her mind whether to do so; for this reason she refuses to force her own daughter to marry. The challenge to gendered conventions here is more sophisticated than the simple adoption of a masculine role in public; instead the story addresses agency in the personal domain to present more profound questions about gendered identity. With Chris Guthrie and other memorable characters in the trilogy, such as Else in *Cloud Howe* and Ellen and Ma Cleghorn in *Grey Granite*, Gibbon is interested in the ways women might retain elements of control, whether through a retreat into interiority, into apparent masculinity, through sexuality, or even through physical stamina and endurance.

If Mitchell’s fiction is striking in its direct questioning of moral and social codes which oppress women, the power of Gibbon’s fiction lies in the complexity with which it convincingly represents those constraints while retaining the space to challenge them. Gibbon’s narrative strength is that he can embody a conservative conformist community perspective which condemns innovative women while at the same time inducing in the reader an imaginative admiration for these challenging characters. By oscillating between the unsympathetic or critical voices of the communities they inhabit, and the women in whom he is most interested, he moves beyond the representation of impossibly challenging female characters (as arguably appear in Mitchell’s fiction) to a broader but more implicit delineation of gender oppression. In his ‘Scottish’ writing Gibbon succeeds in producing an effect in which readers often read against the narrative voice. As a result they identify with those who stand against the conformity of the community. In *Sunset Song*, for example, Chris’s burgeoning relationship with Reverend Colquhoun is articulated in the voice of the community as: ‘ay, Chris Tavendale had feathered her nest right well, the sleeked creature, who would have thought it of her?’, whereas the reader is educated into sympathy with a shift in tone and consciousness:

But they saw the minister was standing behind her, waiting for her, they’d the last of the light with them up there, and maybe they didn’t need it or heed it, you can do without the day if you’ve a lamp quiet-lighted and kind in your heart.[[15]](#endnote-15)

For the reader, fully engaged from the first novel in the trilogy into the consciousness of Chris, it is inevitable that the more sensitive and neutrally-voiced interpretation takes precedence over the prurient ‘speak’ of the community: because of this we are drawn to the challenging woman while still fully aware of the world in which she has to function.

More than most male writers (whichever name he was writing under), Gibbon employs intelligent, strong female characters as focalisers in his fiction. Although other writers of the modern Scottish Renaissance attend to the power of strong women, their deployment is much more obviously in terms of a ‘symbolic feminine’, in which the ‘mysteries’ of womanhood become emblematic of universal mystical powers. Among the many notable instances of this in the fiction of Neil M. Gunn, Kenn, in *Highland River* (1937), sees ‘The abiding calm of his mother, old as the earth’ and in *Butcher’s Broom* (1934) the character ofDark Mairi seems ‘endowed with the uncanny quality of coming out of, and disappearing into, the earth at will’.[[16]](#endnote-16) In Hugh MacDiarmid’s *A Drunk Man Looks at the Thistle* (1926) the symbolic feminine resides with the poem’s ‘silken leddy’, while the waiting Jean functions as a contextualising presence for the interior struggles of the poem’s male protagonist’.[[17]](#endnote-17) With Mitchell/Gibbon, however, the complexity and liveliness of his female creations ensure that his writing is ‘woman-centred’, producing that empathetic reaction in his female readers as described by Deirdre Burton.

The compelling figure of Chris Guthrie has most obviously captured the imagination of readers and critics but her precursor, Thea Mayven, also produces a forceful engagement with female identity and anticipates that nuanced representation of split subjectivity that Burton sees as such a strikingly ‘female’ characteristic of Gibbon’s writing in the *Quair*:

Her body had grown and changed and discarded. But her mind had retained, sifted away into different compartments of the subconscious, all the dross and dregs of vision and experience. The thought-whorls grew the more complex; below them, memories jostled the thicker. And, strangely antagonistic to the logic of these, ever more definite grew that consciousness that was now almost conscious of itself, that whispering knowledge of ‘I’.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Isobel Murray has made a strong case for seeing *A Scots Quair* as inspired by Willa Muir’s novel *Imagined Corners* (1931) in its engagement with formations of female identity.[[19]](#endnote-19) But in 1930 in *Stained Radiance* Mitchell is already exploring a model of the divided female self which may owe something to classic configurations of self-recognition (the opening of *Great Expectations*, for example) but in its allusion to the body (and later in the same passage, to sexuality) demonstrates a complex understanding of the components of female subjectivity. This sophisticated awareness of what it means to say ‘I’ echoes Virginia Woolf’s explorations of the articulations of a gendered self two years earlier, in *Orlando* (1928) and *A Room of One’s Own*. Throughout *A Scots Quair* Gibbon’s modeling of different selves for his central character, even when most famously translated into a conflict of Scots and English − ‘two Chrisses there were that fought for her heart and tormented her’ − has likewise been seen as particularly feminine.[[20]](#endnote-20) In Mitchell’s technically unsuccessful *Image and Superscription*, however, the central character Gershom Jezreel, an outsider because of his religious heritage and family background, is also shown as experiencing dislocating moments of self-recognition. He too looks at himself in the mirror and tries to assimilate his dark face and lighter features: ‘Gershom had seen himself in a mirror on the stairs, he first full-length mirror he had seen for years, and had stopped on those stairs to stare at himself’.[[21]](#endnote-21) If female subjectivity provides the author with the clearest delineation of clashes in identity formation, his understanding of it would appear to extend beyond patterning a gendered self.

It is, however, that complex representation of female identity which has produced both the most admiration and the greatest unease with Gibbon. In particular his delineation of bodily consciousness through a female perspective has provoked criticism. Murray, while admiring the trilogy, questions unequivocally feminist readings of its heroine, mocking what she sees as potentially voyeuristic elements, aimed at titillation: ‘I’ve often asked female students […] whether they have a recurrent need to retreat upstairs to a cold, wintry bedroom, there to undress and inspect themselves slowly in front of the mirror.’[[22]](#endnote-22) Gibbon’s interest in the motif of mirror-gazing as a means of negotiating female subjectivity, which Murray sees as indicative of a male perspective, is not confined to his ‘Scottish’ fiction.In *Three Go Back* Clair Stranlay is not only depicted early in the novel enjoying her physical self (‘She slipped out of wrap and pyjamas, rubbed her white and comely self until she felt warm and pringling and the possessor of an altogether enjoyable body’), but even when turned primitive in the lost world of Atlantis is shown admiring herself in a pool:

It reflected her face and body as her feet touched the edge. She leant on her spear and looked down at herself.

‘Pretty thing still,’ she said, and rubbed her chill arms and flanks, still regarding herself […] her whole body was tinted, yet in some fashion that left it none the less white.[[23]](#endnote-23)

Irritating as such moments may be, their textual and sexual politics are complicated. First, while a present-centred reading may see such moments as reinforcing the male gaze as dominant − and similar criticisms have been leveled against Alan Warner’s *Morvern Callar*[[24]](#endnote-24) ­­− in the context of the 1930s they arguably offer a frank and challenging recognition that women can engage with their own sexual beings rather than only being subject to the male gaze. Compared to Radclyffe Hall’s *The Well of Loneliness* (1928), banned for its representation of lesbianism yet curiously reticent in its depiction of any kind of female sexual self-awareness, or *Imagined Corners* by Gibbon’s north-east compatriot Willa Muir, in which bodily consciousness is more decorously hinted at, Gibbon’s representation contains a candour perhaps only possible in a male writer at the time. Certainly in his work as Mitchell there is a clear agenda to present women as inherently freer of false modesty and sexual repression, as Clair Stranlay’s openness to a different kind of mating ritual, and Domina Riddoch’s celebration of free love demonstrates.

*Gay Hunter*, one of Mitchell’s more successful excursions into ‘scientific romances’ (a genre inspired by H. G. Wells, as explored in chapter ?), offers some insight into gendered bodily awareness and its intersection with Gibbon’s politics. Set in a world thousands of years after our own into which his eponymous heroine is catapulted, Mitchell again operates through a central female consciousness. Transported into a future in which the old ‘hierarchies’ of shame and power have been destroyed and a new, innocent and free species of ‘sub’ people have emerged, Gay embraces the free and honest sexuality of her new world, despising the old models of shame and prurience; as with Clair in *Three Go Back*, she too finds fulfillment in a relationship with one of the new age ‘hunters/savages’. Revealingly, Gay’s own viewing of her body, initially similar to that of Chris in the *Quair* (and as irritatingly familiar in its apparent voyeurism) and to female characters in other novels, is transformed through her experiences in this new world into an articulation of authenticity. After initiating a relationship with the hunter Rem, Gay ‘would stare at herself with secret wonder’, feeling that in her ‘all the starved and cheated women of all time who had mated in shame, inadequately, hemmed in by codes and taboos and shames’ had found ‘harbour’ in the magic she experiences.[[25]](#endnote-25) Before reaching this point she has had to move from an earlier self who delighted simply in looking at her own body – looking in a pool, ‘leaning forward so, the collar of her green dress that flapped forward to frame her head and face, prettily, she thought, though immodestly, for she could look down on the dress of her reflection to a gleam and shadow of shapely breasts’ − and through a period in a physical and emotional wilderness in which ‘[a] wild taggle-haired creature looked at her from this pool and that, with staring eyes and a strained, starved face, and she looked back now at the reflection with a vague interest […] to stare down at the mirrored self that had once given her delight’ to the moment of frank recognition.[[26]](#endnote-26) In this trajectory of a developing female gaze, the novel moves from the fashioned appreciation of a clothed body, through annihilation of the body by a corrupt and self-destructive civilisation, and into a dynamic of the gaze in which self-appreciation can be unmediated. As Gay’s fellow refugees from the twentieth century express their fascist inclinations by desiring to clothe the ‘savages’ in grass kilts, female sexuality becomes in this new world the arena in which a wider politics of power are played out.[[27]](#endnote-27) To read the author’s fascination with women viewing their own bodies as voyeuristic is, in this context, to embody the sexual puritanism, repression and corruption that the novel is arguing against. An actively self-regarding sexuality becomes vital and political in this reimagining of modernity.

If this fascination with women viewing their bodies serves as a central trope for exploring alternative models of authenticity and sexual liberation, gender difference also offers alternative models of political engagement. Again there are distinctions between the fiction of Mitchell and Gibbon. Clair Stranlay, Domina Riddoch and Gay Hunter are all shown as prepared to take heroic action; Gay even initiates a march on London armed with spears. In the *Quair* the political paradigms are again more complicated: while women might offer an alternative perspective on the world it is not necessarily one that is easy to enact. Reflecting on her first love and on World War One, Chris muses:

you did this and that and you went down in hell to bring the fruit of your body to birth, it was nothing to the child that came from your womb, you gave to men the love of your heart, and they’d wring it dry to the last red drop, kind, dreadful and dear, and deep in their souls, whatever the pretence they played with you, they knew it a play and Life waiting outbye.[[28]](#endnote-28)

The implication of (a potentially positive) marginality in the lives of women is reiterated when Chris spends a day walking with the younger woman, Cis, helping her with an all-too-familiar dilemma of heart and body by suggesting: ‘*we’re such fools – women, don’t you think that we are now, Cis? To worry so much about men and their ploys, the things they do and the things they think?*[[29]](#endnote-29) Even in *Gay Hunter* there is a scene in which Gay is ‘suddenly and waywardly desperate for companionship of her own gender’, turning away from the making of male histories.[[30]](#endnote-30) In *A Scots Quair* this tension becomes even more explicitly articulated, firstly in the difference between Chris and Robert and later between herself and her son, again ultimately expressed in a distance from systems of belief: as she says to Ewan that both his faith and that of Robert’s is ‘just another dark cloud to me.’[[31]](#endnote-31)

This weighty investment in the representation of women as potentially outside history is, however, related to a second unease with Gibbon’s fiction: the positioning of women as timeless, non-specific, representative figureheads. As Alison Lumsden astutely notes, the more critics claim the significant representation of female experience in the figure of Chris, the more anxieties they have to address about the stereotypical nature of that representation in its association of the feminine with nature, organicism and an apparent emphasis on passivity.[[32]](#endnote-32) Yet, as critics such as Anderson and Lumsden have argued, Chris represents what might in itself be seen as a ‘third way’, a challenge to models of politics and history that operate with notions of ‘linear time’.[[33]](#endnote-33) Certainly her sense of herself as part of a larger landscape in which ‘nothing endures’ (echoed in *Gay Hunter*) is more than quiescence. Instead it may be translated into skepticism about conventional politics and a changing relationship to history; Lumsden’s application of Kristeva’s essay ‘On Women’s Time’ to the trilogy proves convincing, particularly when understood in relation to Gibbon’s more intellectual and less emotionally engaging fiction. Chris, in this context, is less significant as a representative woman than in the challenge to political and chronological paradigms. The same could be said of Gay Hunter and Clair Stranlay. Even in *Image and Superscription*, where the central consciousness is masculine, the novel’s dark message is most fully articulated by a female character, Ester Caldon: ‘We’re beasts, cruel beasts, worse than any other beasts, and that’s all that the War is, you know. Sadism and cruelty, beasts tearing and stabbing in slime and blood…’[[34]](#endnote-34) It is also Ester who critiques scientist and philosopher Ernst Haeckel, offering an alternative, more positive and diffusionist reading to his evolutionary model: ‘Beasts, yes, but once kindly beasts’.[[35]](#endnote-35) Whether writing as Mitchell or as Gibbon, women figure for this author as a means of interrogating dominant modes of understanding both the past and possible futures.

In *A Scots Quair* national interpretations of the character of Chris Guthrie add an extra burden to this weight of investment in the feminine. While pointing out that the identification of Chris with the nation is explicitly made only twice in *A Scots Quair*, Kirsten Stirling asserts that the acceptance by readers and critics of ‘Chris Caledonia’ ‘says as much about the need for a Scotland-as-woman figurehead in the Renaissance as it does about the intentions of the authors of the period’.[[36]](#endnote-36) The writings of Gunn and MacDiarmid attest to this. Yet to associate Chris Guthrie with Scotland need not necessarily invoke the familiar mythologising of woman as nation, as eternal and as of the earth. Chris serves as representative of Scotland’s own complex history because of the challenge she presents to schematic political models and abstract systems of belief. When Robert tells her ‘Chris Caledonia I married a nation’, it is because she refuses to engage in romantic abstractions about what it is like to be pregnant; he asks ‘*What does it feel like being as you are − a nuisance, just, or tremendous and terrible?*’ and she replies that ‘it made you feel sick, now and then’.[[37]](#endnote-37) Her practical specificity, rather than simply a gendered characteristic, is translated here and at other points in the trilogy as a mode of resistance to belief systems:

And you thought how long, long ago with Will, your brother, that time he came home from France, before he went back and was killed in France you’d said that Scots were never religious, had never BELIEVED as other folks did; and that was fell true, and not only for you.[[38]](#endnote-38)

Scottishness, here imagined as a female practicality and reluctance to engage in abstraction, challenges metanarratives of time and history. Although Chris Guthrie may become part of an apparent timelessness in the last pages of *Grey Granite*, the broad sweep of the trilogy suggests this is a moment responding to and shaped by historical processes. The impulse to understand such processes may demand a return to the ‘pre-historical’ and ‘primitive’, as Olive Schreiner’s *Woman and Labour* (1911) suggests and the fantasy fiction of Mitchell indicates, but is firm in its engagement with the present moment and its specifics. Dixon argues that Gibbon ‘well knew there was no such thing as “the Scot”, but Scottish rulers and ruled, masters and servants, bosses and workers’.[[39]](#endnote-39) The figure through which he challenged generalisation may have been glibly appropriated as national myth, but she serves in the trilogy to defeat such grand obliterations of difference.

The strength of female characterisation, the deployment of women as signifiers of political alternatives and the articulation of a female voice in James Leslie Mitchell/Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s fiction mark it as adventurous and experimental. He is not, however, alone in time or place in this respect: his work has to be situated alongside women writers who are not only contemporaneous but also writing from that same corner of Scotland: Nan Shepherd, Willa Muir and Lorna Moon all produced fiction which challenges the gender conventions of north-east society, explores identity formation and experiments with new voices in both Scots and English. The relationship between these writers is difficult to configure. While, as discussed, Murray suggests that *A Scots Quair* could not have been written without the influence of Muir’s *Imagined Corners*, particularly in its addressing of the idea of a split self, this was already a motif in his writing.[[40]](#endnote-40) Nan Shepherd’s novel *The Quarry Wood* (1928) offers more striking parallels: in the character of Martha Ironside, growing up on a croft but desiring education and escape, the novel articulations a similar set of aspirations to Chris Guthrie but presents a different trajectory. By going to university Martha moves (for a time) beyond the apparently limited world of the land, even if the novel’s conclusion appears to advocate a more resigned return to her roots. Shepherd’s later novel, *The Weatherhouse* (1930), like *A Scot’s Quair*, confronts the impact of the World War One but is arguably more experimental than the trilogy in its multiplicity of narratives and range of interiorities. Muir and Shepherd both moved in the literary circles of the modern Scottish Renaissance so it is perhaps unsurprising that their experiments and interests overlapped with Gibbon’s. Parallels with another woman writer from the north-east of Scotland are perhaps more tenuous but nevertheless striking. If Gibbon’s linguistic technique can be convincingly read (as Lumsden suggests) as a model of *écriture féminine*, in which the use of Scots becomes ‘a strategy to “haunt” the “smooth technique” of Gibbon’s narrative; to “shatter language” and “give voice to the unnameable” to borrow Kristeva’s terms’, it can also be aligned with techniques used by lesser-known novelist Lorna Moon, a native of Strichen.[[41]](#endnote-41) In her short stories, published as *Doorways in Drumorty* (1925), Helen Nora Wilson Low, growing up in Aberdeenshire but writing in the Unites States, set out to create a voice which would not be ‘dialect’ but would nevertheless ‘use the idiom common to Scottish people’.[[42]](#endnote-42) Moon’s novel *Dark Star* (1929) moves from the intimate and domestic scenarios that form the basis of her short stories to a melodramatic narrative, more suitable to her career as a Hollywood scriptwriter, but retains an interest in community and voices from all levels of north-eastern society. Mitchell is consistently scathing of romantic fiction in his novels − in *Three Go Back*, for example, Clair Stranlay is savagely shaken out of the worldview formed by her career as a romantic novelist − so an appreciation of Lorna Moon might seem unlikely; but both writers share linguistic interests as well as the experience of being repudiated by their respective communities for the depiction of them.

It is difficult to assess the extent to which Gibbon drew on these writers but each, in their different ways and to various extents, challenged the literary conventions he despised. For these male and female novelists from the north-east of Scotland, as for other modernists, ‘an imaginary identification with the feminine emerged as a key stratagem in the literary avant-garde subversion of sexual and textual norms’.[[43]](#endnote-43) However problematic feminist interpretations of Mitchell’s and Gibbon’s writing might be, that project to imagine a different world, a project with women at its centre, shapes all his fiction.

1. Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own* (1929), first delivered as lectures in 1928. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. See Helen B. Cruickshank, ‘Mearns Memory’, *Scots Magazine*, February 1939, pp. 351−3. In *Octobiography* (Montrose: Strand Press, 1976) Cruickshank describes writing to the author of *Sunset Song*: ‘I added a postscript that we would be delighted to welcome L.G.G. at Dinnieduff if he, or she, were visiting Edinburgh’, noting that her mother, ‘still a great reader at eighty years of age, devoured the book eagerly’ (p. 87). [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. Deirdre Burton, ‘A Feminist Reading of Lewis Grassic Gibbon’s *A Scots Quair*’, in *The British Working-Class Novel in the Twentieth Century*, ed. byJeremy Hawthorn (London: Edward Arnold, 1984), pp. 35−46 (p. 35). [↑](#endnote-ref-3)
4. J. Leslie Mitchell, *The Thirteenth Disciple* (Edinburgh: B & W Publishing, 1995), p. 215. [↑](#endnote-ref-4)
5. Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *A Scots Quair:* *Cloud Howe* (London: Jarrolds, 1952), p.139. [↑](#endnote-ref-5)
6. Cicely Hamilton, *Marriage as a Trade* (London: The Women’s Press, 1981), p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-6)
7. J. Leslie Mitchell, *Three Go Back* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1995), p. 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-7)
8. Ibid., p. 106. [↑](#endnote-ref-8)
9. See Keith Dixon, ‘Rough Edges: the Feminist Representation of Women in the Writing of Lewis Grassic Gibbon’, in *Studies in Scottish Fiction: Twentieth Century*, ed. by Horst Drescher and Joachim Schwend (Frankfurt-am-Main: Peter Lang, 1990); ‘The Gospel According to Saint Bakunin: Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Libertarian Communism’ in *A Flame in the Mearns*, ed. by Margery Palmer McCulloch and Sarah M. Dunnigan (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2003), pp. 136−47. [↑](#endnote-ref-9)
10. Lewis Grassic Gibbon, ‘Forsaken’, in Lewis Grassic Gibbon and Hugh MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene, or The Intelligent Man’s Guide to Albyn* (1934); reprinted in *Smeddum: A Lewis Grassic Gibbon Anthology*, ed. by Valentina Bold (Edinburgh: Canongate, 2001), pp. 46−57 (p. 50). [↑](#endnote-ref-10)
11. J. Leslie Mitchell, ‘The Road’, originally published in *The Cornhill*, LXVII, September 1929, pp. 341−52; reprinted in *Smeddum*, pp.250−64. [↑](#endnote-ref-11)
12. Dixon (1990), Rough Edges: the Feminist Representation of Women in the Writing of Lewis Grassic Gibbon’. [↑](#endnote-ref-12)
13. J. Leslie Mitchell, *Image and Superscription* (London: Jarrolds, 1933). Although published later, this novel was written soon after *Stained Radiance*: see Peter Whitfield, *Lewis Grassic Gibbon and His World* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen Journals, 1991). [↑](#endnote-ref-13)
14. Lewis Grassic Gibbon, ‘Smeddum’, in Gibbon and MacDiarmid, *Scottish Scene*; reprinted in *Smeddum*, pp. 34−45 (p. 36). [↑](#endnote-ref-14)
15. Lewis Grassic Gibbon *A Scots Quair:* *Sunset Song* (London: Jarrolds, 1952), pp. 191, 194. [↑](#endnote-ref-15)
16. Neil M. Gunn, *Highland River* (London; Arrow Books, 1975), p. 107; *Butcher’s Broom* (London: Souvenir Press, 1977), p. 318. For further discussion of the ‘symbolic feminine’ in twentieth-century Scottish writing and earlier see Carol E. Anderson, ‘The Representation of Women in Scottish Fiction: Character and Symbol’ (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Edinburgh, 1985). [↑](#endnote-ref-16)
17. For discussion of this see Kirsten Stirling, *Bella Caledonia: Woman, Nation, Text* (Amsterdam: Rodopi Press, 2008), pp. 40−7; Aileen Christianson, ‘Flyting with a Drunk Man’, *Scottish Affairs*, 5 (1993), pp. 126−35. [↑](#endnote-ref-17)
18. J. Leslie Mitchell, *Stained Radiance* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1993), p. 82. [↑](#endnote-ref-18)
19. Isobel Murray, ‘Selves, Names and Roles: Willa Muir’s *Imagined Corners* Offers Some Inspiration for *A Scots Quair*’, *Scottish Literary Journal*, 21: 1 (1994), pp. 56−64. [↑](#endnote-ref-19)
20. Gibbon, *Sunset Song*, p. 37. [↑](#endnote-ref-20)
21. Mitchell, *Image and Superscription*, p. 174. [↑](#endnote-ref-21)
22. Isobel Murray, ‘Gibbon’s Chris: A Celebration with Some Reservations’, in *A Flame in the Mearns*, pp. 54−63 (p. 59). [↑](#endnote-ref-22)
23. Mitchell, *Three Go Back*, pp. 12, 142. [↑](#endnote-ref-23)
24. Carol Anderson, ‘*Morvern Callar*’, in *Scottish Literary Journal Supplement*,44 (1996), pp. 64−7. [↑](#endnote-ref-24)
25. J. Leslie Mitchell, *Gay Hunter* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1989), p. 102. [↑](#endnote-ref-25)
26. Ibid., pp. 4, 92. [↑](#endnote-ref-26)
27. Edwin Morgan’s Introduction to the 1989 Polygon edition of *Gay Hunter* offers an excellent analysis of these developments. [↑](#endnote-ref-27)
28. Gibbon, *Cloud Howe*, p. 10. [↑](#endnote-ref-28)
29. Ibid., p. 126. [↑](#endnote-ref-29)
30. Mitchell, *Gay Hunter*, p. 117. [↑](#endnote-ref-30)
31. Lewis Grassic Gibbon, *A Scots Quair:* *Grey Granite* (London: Jarrolds, 1952), p. 143. [↑](#endnote-ref-31)
32. Alison Lumsden ‘“Women’s Time”: Reading the *Quair* as a Feminist Text’, in *A Flame in the Mearns*,pp. 41−53 (p. 42). [↑](#endnote-ref-32)
33. See Anderson, ‘The Representation of Women in Scottish Fiction: Character and Symbol’; Lumsden, in *A Flame in the Mearns*. [↑](#endnote-ref-33)
34. Mitchell, *Image and Superscription*, p. 181. [↑](#endnote-ref-34)
35. Ibid., p. 225. [↑](#endnote-ref-35)
36. See Stirling, *Bella Caledonia: Woman, Nation, Text*, pp. 49−50. [↑](#endnote-ref-36)
37. Gibbon, *Cloud Howe*, p. 104. [↑](#endnote-ref-37)
38. Ibid., p. 42. [↑](#endnote-ref-38)
39. Dixon, in *A Flame in the Mearns*, p. 138. [↑](#endnote-ref-39)
40. Murray, *Scottish Literary Journal* (1994), pp. 56−64. [↑](#endnote-ref-40)
41. Lumsden, in *A Flame in the Mearns*, p. 50. [↑](#endnote-ref-41)
42. Glenda Norquay, ‘Finding a Place: the Voice of Lorna Moon’, *Études Écossaises*, 9 (2003−4), pp. 91−103. [↑](#endnote-ref-42)
43. Rita Felski, *The Gender of Modernity* (Cambridge, Mass. and London: Harvard University Press, 1995), p. 91.

    Willa Muir is discussed by Gibbon in ‘Literary Lights’, as having ‘promise of becoming a great artist. But a great English artist.’ *Scottish Scene*, reprinted in *Smeddum*, pp. 123−37 (p. 130). For further discussion of the relationship between these writers and the influence of Shepherd see: Alison Lumsden, ‘“To Get Leave to Live”: Negotiating Regional Identity in the Literature of North-East Scotland’, in *The Edinburgh History of Scottish Literature: Modern Transformations: New Identities* vol. 3, ed. by Ian Brown and others (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), and R. C. Craig, in *The Oxford Companion to Scottish History*, ed. by Michael Lynch (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1997), p. 158. For a different recontextualising of these writers see Katie Gramich, ‘Caught in the triple net: Welsh, Scottish and Irish Women Writers’, in *The History of British Women’s Writing 1920−1945*, ed. by Maroula Joannou (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2013), pp. 217−32. [↑](#endnote-ref-43)