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Gibson, Corey

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Clannish Confines
The Folk, the Proletariat, and the People in
Modern Scottish Literature

Corey Gibson

The title of this chapter derives from a song-poem, or “ballad pastiche,” by the poet and folk revivalist Hamish Henderson (1919–2002). Titled “Glasclune and Drumlochy,” its speaker describes an elevated view of the Lornty burn (stream) “that marked the clannish confine” (*Poems* 139–40): the border between the eponymous historical estates whose blood-feud was, according to Henderson, part of the local lore of his early childhood in Blairgowrie and Glenshee. In the stanzas that follow, the enmity between these families is described in language that variously flits between the aristocratic detachment of the ballad register (“There were two castles, / two battled keeps”), and the playful vernacular of a skipping rhyme (“the dowdy, duddy Lornty”). Glasclune’s eventual victory is attributed to his use of the cannon: a breaking with traditional methods that invites disgrace in the eyes of “ceevilised folk.” In the closing lines, Henderson provokes a sudden and quite startling shift in perspective. In the present inhabited by the poetic voice, all that is left of this historical blood-feud is “Twa herts on ae shiv / An’ a shitten larach” (Two hearts on one blade, and a contemptible ruin) (*Poems* 139–40). In his notes, Henderson suggests that this might be understood as a monument to the “millennial internecine conflict of human kind.” Its national dimension, expressed in its form and language, is further affirmed as these “confines” are said to lie in “jagged outline” across Scottish history (*Poems* 163). This local model of the universal – the common inhumanity that is our historical inheritance – is perpetuated, if not caused, by “clannish confines.” These arbitrary lines of exclusion (and inclusion) can only be reimagined and reaffirmed; they seem always to resist resolution.

In a chapter on working class writers and representations of the working class in modern Scottish literature, the relevance of this turn of phrase, “clannish confines,” and its source, is twofold. First, this effort to reconcile the local with the universal through the intermediary of the *national* speaks

directly to a well-established strain of literary experimentation in Scotland founded in the 1920s. Second, it appeals to a conception of history as conflict. In this case, the clash is between landed families, one representing tradition and the other progress. It is a familiar dialectic, and one that acknowledges the conflict along “clan” lines as one capable of taking on the symbolic burden of universal transhistorical suffering. If history is to see any kind of advancement of the class interests of the unpropertied, the implication reads, we must break with the false consciousness that allows for such “inter-clan” violence. In other words, class conflict is the only permissible kind. Through its form – its lexicon and its prosody, in particular – “Glasclune and Drumlochy” appeals to a common *oral* culture that is, or might be supposed to be, protected from the mediation of a singular “artist” or the condescension of an editor. It speaks with the immediacy and intimacy of a children’s rhyme and with the timeless authority of Scotland’s own “lays,” the ballads. As a product of the postwar Scottish folk revival, and a particular effort to graft that movement to the perceived cultural political achievements of the modernist “renaissance,” this poem was conceived in conjunction with a radical national tradition that put great store in the culture of “the people.”

This chapter will describe the relationship between working class identity and national identity in modern Scottish writing. It will scrutinize both the elisions that have been allowed to proliferate in representing this relationship, and the tensions and contradictions that are innate to it. Class is a designation that cuts across national boundaries and historical epochs, but it is lived, and carries its cultural signifiers, more locally, and more transiently. In his conception of world-systems theory, Immanuel Wallerstein elaborates on this nexus, insisting that “class” and “nation” are “two sets of clothing for the same basic reality”: the former is global and economic, the latter is local, social, and most importantly, it is the setting and context for both “class consciousness” and “ethno-national” consciousness – states of being which can, though perhaps ought not to, overlap (Wallerstein 224–5; McCrone 56). The nation state, though born out of class conflict, is, therefore, at once too narrow and too broad a conception to be neatly reconcilable with lived working class experience. Nevertheless, since the interwar Scottish literary renaissance, the nation’s literary traditions have been periodically characterized, by authors and critics alike, as distinctly *democratic* as compared to the English literary canon (see Lindsay; Wittig; Watson, *Poetry*; Crawford, *Scotland’s Books*). This conception is perpetuated, as one might expect, by its notional appeal, the anecdotal evidence proffered by Burns’s symbolic onus, and by confirmation bias. But it also

rests on discrete models of authorship – and on prescribed notions of the relationship between artist and society. In recent years critics have come to interrogate the ways in which these claims to exceptionalism in the Scottish literary tradition have developed over time (see Bell, *Questioning*; Hames, *Unstated*; and Thomson, “You Can’t”).

This conception of the nation’s literary heritage was, especially between the 1920s and 1960s, inspired and sustained by an effort among some writers to synthesize residual forms of romantic nationalism with emergent notions of socialist internationalism. After this period, this tension was variously compounded, broken down, or ironized by writers, if not completely circumvented. Meanwhile critics sought out ever more sophisticated articulations of the same dynamic, to absorb and account for shifting literary landscapes. The shape and direction of this development might be most concisely expressed using some predominant constructions for the “collective” *of* whom, *for* whom, or (at the very least) *from* among whom, the author speaks. From the “folk” and the “proletariat,” which reach out respectively from the romantic and socialist traditions, to more nebulous conceptions such as “the people,” and finally, to disaggregated “people” themselves (freed from the definite article), these constructs provide us with a useful shorthand for the development of literary intersections between nation and class.

Scottish Culture, Working Class Culture, and Folk Culture

In his contribution to Scott Hames’s edited collection *Unstated: Writers on Scottish Independence* (2012), James Kelman explains:

Being ‘too indigenous’ is the same as being ‘too working class’ and, predictably, the closer we move to the realm of class the clearer we find concerns of race and ethnicity. . . . The key is class. ‘Scottishness’ equates to class and class equals conflict. Even within Scotland we can be criticised for this. The work of writers deemed ‘too Scottish’ shares a class background. (119)

If class allegiance can be glossed over with the potent proxy of national belonging, it can be readily dismissed insofar as it challenges cosmopolitan bourgeois norms. The writer designated as such must be guilty of perpetuating “clannish confines” incommensurable with progressive politics in a globalized world, languishing as they do within outmoded, exclusionary group identities. Kelman rejects this posture without denying the existence of strategic elisions between nation and class; rather, he provides an

explanation. The degree of explicit or implicit national belonging in literary expression is significant insofar as it can be explained by class conflict.

In his work on the Scottish industrial novel, Manfred Malzahn has described the importance of class in Scottish self-perception: due to “anglicised urban middle-class counterparts,” any assertion of working class identity in Scotland is, he claims, “likely to appear also as the assertion of a Scottish identity” (230). But this account – of impressions given by writers and interpretations applied to their work – also leads to more complex anxieties about affectation and competing claims to authenticity. It has become a critical commonplace in Scottish literary studies since the 1980s that the dominance of unitary cultural “types” must be resisted: the mythopoeia of Red Clydeside radicalism as well as Kailyard sentimentalism should be scrutinized. Nevertheless, this insistence on criticism over myth does not go so far as to address the long-overwrought “predicament of the Scottish writer” (from the subtitle of Edwin Muir’s 1936 study *Scott and Scotland*), that is, the question of what, if anything, is particular about the national designation, and the problem of how this singularity might be fully realized, or reaffirmed, in lieu of modernity. In other words, efforts to deploy the national framework yet resist essentialism cannot help but maintain what Christopher Whyte has identified as a persistent tautology: “What matters is not whether Scottish society is indeed democratic and egalitarian, but rather that a sufficient number of Scottish people should, even delusively, have believed this was the case, for a sufficient length of time” (11–14). Both the Kailyard and Red Clydeside are, as contested sites of “cultural heritage,” characterized by a robust communitarian strain: one mythologizing spaces either beyond or on the outer reaches of industrialization, and the other among the urban working class on whose labor it was built. However, acknowledging the fecundity of these sites for mythmaking does not banish the emergent myths. Similarly, reaffirming our sense of the *national* literary tradition by insisting on its pluralism or hybridity does not help us transcend, or otherwise overcome, the problem posed by the “nation.” It constitutes only a deferral.

Anxiety around the deficiencies of class and/or national identity in the late twentieth and early twenty-first centuries did not emerge uniformly from modern Scottish literary history. Certainly, writers have not always been averse to tackling the national “predicament” – though critics have carried the mantle in recent decades – and neither have they been shy, historically, of writing the working class into an undifferentiated mass. As his career advanced, Hugh MacDiarmid (1892–1978) positioned himself more visibly between the twin poles of Scottish nationalism and socialist

internationalism. However, among his earliest editorials evangelizing on behalf of the ascendant literary renaissance, these principles were expressed purely in terms of creative and critical practice. Concentrated by a commitment to *Scottish* and *European* cultural contexts, and a calculated resistance to what he later terms the “English Ascendancy in British Literature,”²¹ the inaugural issue of his *Scottish Chapbook* described in its editorial, “A New Movement in Scottish Literature.” In its conclusion, MacDiarmid poses an imagined “mythical personage” of the typical Scotsman, only to have it immediately confounded by a painter-friend who, working to the same rubric, sketches

a Glasgow ‘keelie,’²² a Polish pitman from Lanarkshire, a Dundee Irishman, an anarchist orator of a kind frequently seen at the Mound Edinburgh on Sunday nights, a Perthshire farmer, a Hebridean islander, and a Berwickshire bondager. (MacDiarmid, *Prose* 7)

MacDiarmid confirmed the need for a *new* literature that might not exclude these figures in favor of the dominie, the minister, and the “lad o’ pairs” so familiar to the Kailyard. However, having insisted on this gesture toward another substantially gendered, but otherwise relatively diverse, cast of the “typical,” MacDiarmid returns to a kind of solidarity that might easily be mistaken for coalescence. Difference or diversity is not the operative value, but underlying unity:

The result was that each of these acutely differentiated faces acquired a peculiar unplaceable resemblance – an elusive likeness that had in each case a faintly ennobling air. A like task confronts Scottish writers today. I believe that forces are now discernable in Scottish life and literature which will have a similar unifying and uplifting effect. (MacDiarmid, *Prose* 8)

At this stage in his thought, containing the far-reaching political-philosophical precepts of romantic nationalism and internationalist socialism in such plain (if vague), faux-naïve terms, MacDiarmid seems to take on a greater risk of the parochialism his movement was intended to remedy. If, as MacDiarmid later claimed, “The cause of the Scots literary movement is the cause of the Scottish people,” then we are asked to trust that these seemingly ineffable ideals are mutually affirming (*Prose* 162). In this rendering, therefore, national literary self-realization demands that the risk is taken and that the contradictory movement both beyond and within “clannish confines” be embraced.

Nationalism and socialism may be listed among the most recognizably impactful ideological precepts in twentieth-century geopolitics, but, in the context of the burgeoning renaissance, their cultural appeal was transmuted

in less abstracted, more intuitively felt forms, not least in the inheritance and redeployment of the Scots vernacular and of Scottish folk culture. Another of MacDiarmid's most influential early proclamations was that the "Scots Vernacular" constituted a "vast unutilized mass of lapsed observation . . . an inchoate Marcel Proust – a Dostoeveskian [*sic*] debris of ideas – an inexhaustible quarry of subtle and significant sound" (*Prose* 22–3). MacDiarmid extolls the virtues of the vernacular, not only in terms of its capacity for modernistic experiment, but also in its apparent immunity to the excesses of condescension and didacticism on the one hand, and the lachrymose and specious, on the other. Its "democratic spirit" comes from its common heritage, and, therefore, its common touch, as with folk culture. And, in this sense, rather paradoxically, the traditions or folk inheritances of the nation come to inaugurate its modernistic credentials. This is borne out by some of the most celebrated poets of the renaissance, and especially in MacDiarmid's own lyrics.

In his early collection, *Penny Wheep* (1926), titles like "The Love-sick Lass," "Servant Girl's Bed," and "The Bonnie Lowe" make their allusion to the chapbook tradition of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries clear (*Poems* I: 55, 65, 67). Meanwhile, a work like "Focherty" is set in the bucolic market town and describes the eponymous local "big man," a force of nature who tramples smaller men, like the speaker, with ease. The final lines imagine Focherty on Judgment Day, "like a bull in the sale-ring" (*Poems* I: 53). Both local lore and the settings and events of the everyday are suddenly transplanted to a supernatural plane and to the end of Time, but so, too, are petty village politics. Finally, in "Your Immortal Memory, Burns!" MacDiarmid redirects his subtle appropriation of the "bardic voice" to attack its most celebrated proponent, or, more specifically, the cult attached to his name: "Thy power alone / The spectacle attests / Of drunken bourgeois on the Muses' breasts!" (*Poems* I: 77–9). The part-vernacular, part-dictionary-dredged Scots that is common to these pieces derives its connotative heft and scope from the processes of folk culture, and from the accumulated histories and usages that are bound up in this lexicon, these meters and rhymes.

William Soutar (1898–1943) made frequent use of the ballad stanza and insisted on its importance in the literary movement to which he belonged: "the fact that the ballad is the most stimulating source of inspiration for the modern writer in Scots manifests the social implications of the vernacular revival: it is symptomatic of our need and our desire to recreate a true community" (*Diaries* 128). If this yearning is expressed in the writer's adoption of the vernacular or the ballad form, as critics, we have to recognize the

absence-in-modernity that this reveals, as well as the retrograde grasping for old forms as antidotes to contemporary problems. This “true community” must, by implication, be situated at some productive intersection of class unity and national belonging, and it must extend both diachronically and synchronically to include the depth of the past and the breadth of the present.

While Soutar believed that the revival of the Scots vernacular was instrumental in both “the rediscovery of our national roots” and in a broader political “alignment with the worker,” his use of these sources was less reflexive, and less cynical, than MacDiarmid’s (“Vernacular” 50–51). Though he is often regarded as writing in the shadow of the latter, their poetics, in fact, diverged sharply. Soutar’s has a formal clarity, through which it resembles more closely the products of the folk tradition, and, though it channels a transcendentalism familiar to readers of *Penny Wheep*, its imagery is not so concentrated or elliptical. “The Tryst,” perhaps his most anthologized piece, is a pared-down lament that seems to hold within it the essence of all those antecedent ballads and folk songs built on the motif of the “night-visitor”: “Sae luely, luely cam she in / Sae luely was she gaen” (“luely”: quietly, softly) (Soutar, *Poems* 36). In “Ballad,” another in the mode of the night-visitor, the speaker describes her response to the apparition of her dead lover in the half-light: “I thocht the hale o’ the world was there / Sae sma’ and in a sma’ room” (Soutar, *Poems* 138). In their simultaneous examination of cosmic expansiveness and claustrophobic domesticity, these closing lines point to another of Soutar’s characteristic themes: the limitations that seem implicit in the deployment of an individual poetic voice and the risk of over-extension that comes with assuming a communal or collective posture to anticipate this problem.

In his diaries, Soutar demonstrates a healthy skepticism toward both Marxian political philosophy and his cohort’s flirtations with romantic nationalism: “the dogmatic Marxist can forget the individual in the class and thereby fail to differentiate between hating a system productive of classes and hating our fellow beings”; “[the vernacular revival] brings with it the dangerous seduction of taking refuge in the womb of the past and calling it a rebirth” (*Diaries*, 79–80, 50). However, these perfectly valid concerns are not, as with MacDiarmid, acknowledged in the structures and registers of his work. Where MacDiarmid might bulldoze these concerns or avoid them altogether in a way so conspicuous as to draw attention to the fact, Soutar does not embody this paradox of bullish nuance. Indeed, he was well aware of this limitation and knew that it led to a degree of avoidance or approximation in his poetry: “I am afraid I have as yet barely begun

to accept that challenge [of reconciling himself, as a Scottish poet, with the tensions in his national identity and his class allegiance]. The acceptance will be . . . a vicarious answer" (*Diaries* 78). This vicariousness was to be adopted in different forms by subsequent Scottish writers.

Writing a Radical Tradition

In his efforts to triangulate the role of the poet between the poles of romantic nationalism, socialist internationalism, and "the people," who are the source and promise of the other two, MacDiarmid found that modernist avant-gardism and Leninist vanguardism provided him with the redeeming models of authorship and influence he sought. His resultant elitism was the most persistent cause of his public rifts with other Scottish writers and critics, and Henderson – champion of the Scottish folk revival and of MacDiarmid's poetic genius – was no exception. In their public "flytings" in the late 1950s and mid-1960s, they enacted a long-standing and definitive tension in the Scottish cultural tradition as generally conceived at the time: that between the accumulated cultural inheritance in its popular *living* form, and its future trajectory according to those who had both absorbed it very selectively and sought to shape its advance.³ Such criticisms are, however, a little unfair, as neither poet was immune from his own projections and mediation, but the difference in emphasis is nevertheless vital: Henderson sought to foster a "genuine people's culture," while MacDiarmid promoted an art that would speak to an unrealized revolutionary future, that would refuse to patronize the people by disguising or excising its politics or its complexity (Gibson, *The Voice*). For both men, an independent socialist republic was the prize, but, as artists, they conceptualized their contributions to this end entirely differently.

In his later poetry, MacDiarmid often describes the importance and the *difficulty* of "winning up to the level of the proletariat," of truly being one with the working class (*Poems* 407). In a passage from his "Third Hymn to Lenin" admonishing the 1930s Group, he distinguishes himself from Auden and his peers in this endeavor: "Unlike the pseudos I am *of* – not *for* – the working class" (*Poems* 900). The difference in these prepositions is telling: "of" expresses the relationship of the part to the whole, whereas "for" – as "in support of" or "on behalf of" – speaks of a distance; it positions its subject outside of, but functioning as, representative of its object. MacDiarmid is not only indulging in a form of inverted snobbery – lauding his class background – he is reaffirming the importance of belonging to but being distinguished within a group belonging. This is the kind of

negotiation intrinsic to a cultural politics constructed around the dialectic between national and class consciousness.

In John Maclean (1879–1923), Red Clydeside leader, Bolshevik consul to Scotland, and latter-day folk-hero of the Scottish left, MacDiarmid and many subsequent others found a modern martyr for this combined cause of revolutionary socialism and national self-determination. Maclean died at only 44 due to ill health, exacerbated, if not caused by, his cruel treatment while in prison for “sedition.” Not only did the “great John Maclean” believe that the Scottish working class were disposed toward a more rapid revolutionary trajectory than their peers in England, Ireland, and Wales, he was convinced that the communist ideal was written into the people’s history. He envisaged the clan system that had survived into the eighteenth century as a model of “Celtic” proto-communism that could still be recaptured in a modern struggle for “one clan” delineated along national lines. In Scotland, therefore, he thought it possible to accurately proclaim: “back to communism and forward to communism” (Maclean 133–9). Though this romantic mystification is quite baseless in terms of the economic, social, and cultural realities of Scottish history, its traction amid the violence and divisiveness of the twentieth century is perhaps not so difficult to explain. In the 1930s and 1940s, MacDiarmid developed what he variously described as “The Red Scotland Thesis” or “The Maclean Line,” where Maclean embodied the nation: “The unification of Scotland – Highland and Lowland, rural and urban – was complete in himself” (MacDiarmid, “Maclean” 2–4). This image, of the martyred leader who had, in his life, combined philosophy and praxis, recurred in poems by MacDiarmid and by an emergent group of working class socialist Scots poets in the years following the Second World War. In collections like John Kincaid, George Todd, F. J. Anderson, and Thurso Berwick’s *Foursom Reel* (1948), and T. S. Law’s *Whit Tyme in the Day* (1948), these poets marked twenty-five years since Maclean’s death by lining up behind his call for a Scottish Workers’ Republic. In their epigrams they identified with the socialist MacDiarmid, foregoing the formal experimentation of the “Lallans Makars” (Scots-language poets) whom they dismissed as bourgeois nationalists (Hubbard). They heralded Maclean as representative of their political inheritance, and, extending their group to include a younger generation of poets in 1973, a further 25 years after his death, they published another collection of poems and songs, *Homage to John Maclean* (1973). Here, Maclean was canonized: placed in the radical national tradition alongside Wallace, Bruce, Burns, and Thomas Muir (martyr and political reformer of the late eighteenth century). He became the culmination of a tradition that was desperately

seeking new forms for its continuation. In one of the more questioning and less hagiographical contributions, Edwin Morgan imagines “the rock of nations . . . saw-toothed, half-submerged,” the ships “Workingclass Solidarity” and “International Brotherhood” wrecked nearby, while Maclean trims the lighthouse lamp, and thereby reveals a “Scottish Socialism” whereby nationhood might be transfigured and redeployed to guide the metaphorical ships on their journey, to act as a topographical reference point, rather than a final destination (Law and Berwick 18–20).

In James Barke’s 1936 novel, *Major Operation*, the bourgeois coal-broker George Anderson is enlisted to the socialist cause by a John Maclean figure – an educator, and charismatic agitator – named Jock MacKelvie. In his later epic realist novel, *Land of the Leal* (1939), which describes the repeated relocations of the Ramsay family over two generations, from around the turn of the century to the time of the novel’s publication, MacKelvie reappears among the dockworkers of the Clyde where the family finally find themselves, having originated in the Rhins of Galloway, and passed through the dairy farms of the Borders and the landed estates of Fife. Finding hardship and exploitation wherever they go, the Ramsays document the movement from the oft-idealized pre-proletarian communities of the late-nineteenth-century Kailyard to the urban industrial landscape that was more familiar to the realist novel of the 1930s. Though David and Jean Ramsay come to think fondly, in some respects, of the various pasts they gather behind them, the cruelty and poverty of these experiences is neither diminished, nor forgotten. We come to recognize both the falsity of poetic myth and the compulsion to compose such myths through the vagaries of memory and the fear of death. The phenomenological prompts for these projections are revealed to be indistinguishable from the narratives that grow out of our group belonging. Where David, the father, looks to the romantic poet: “he had felt with Burns that rank was indeed but the guinea stamp”; Andrew, the son, looks to Maclean the agitator, whose speech on a local street corner is a significant event in his developing class consciousness: “If they [his parents] didn’t understand the nature and significance of the system that had driven them like beasts for the greater part of their lives, he did. He and his generation” (Barke, *Leal* 243, 518).

Both sons – Andrew, who dies fighting for the International Brigades in Spain, and Tom, the Church of Scotland minister – come under the tutelage of MacKelvie. The novel’s denouement comes with Tom’s rousing antifascist sermon, after which MacKelvie explains to him the virtues of a working class upbringing: “A worker knows what it is to suffer – and he’s prepared to suffer for his political beliefs.” Tom responds: “I feel that in

working for Socialism . . . I am working for something that justifies their whole existence – justifies all the suffering and hardship they have undergone” (*Leal* 609). In “Land o’ the Leal,” the popular ballad by Carolina Nairne (1766–1845), the title refers to heaven and the promise it affords as “the land of the faithful,” but in Barke’s novel, it incites an ironic reading and stands as a metonym for the persistent interrogation of the faith (or loyalties) that should be afforded to the powers that preside over, and the structures that maintain, such entrenched hardship. The only recompense available is an emerging class consciousness and another deferred promise: an historical end, still distant, but that must be met if innumerable lives like the Ramsays’ are to consummate their historical purpose.

During the 1930s Barke was critical of the nationalist intelligentsia in Scotland, and particularly the writers. Though he was sympathetic to the national cause, he maintained that it should be subordinate to the struggle against capitalism, and he envisaged the only true reconciliation between national- and class-belonging would be one that united the artist and the people: “All that is truly national, all that is best and worthy of preservation in the various national cultures is the heritage of the workers and peasants concerned, of the class in whose hands the future lies” (Barke, “National Question” 369).⁴ In *A Scots Quair*, Lewis Grassie Gibbon drew from a similar nexus in the communal culture, one drawing its significance from the accumulated past and the perpetually deferred promise of the future. Where the first of that trilogy closes with the titular “Sunset Song,” lamenting the “Last of the Peasants, the last of the Old Scots folk” (256), Barke’s *Major Operation* opens with an analogous sunset on Glasgow, “The Second City [of the British Empire],” looked upon by the upper and middle classes with “polite interest and polite unconcern,” and, by the working class (if at all), with mere “indifference” (14). It signifies a transition that has been replayed *ad infinitum*: a brief distraction for the bourgeoisie and an irrelevance to the proletariat.

Gibbon’s trilogy is marked throughout by two indelible forces sometimes articulated in alignment with one another, sometimes in stark opposition, and sometimes in subtle confusion: first is the much-vaunted hold of the “land” on these “Old Scots folk,” that which, in Chris’s eyes, “endures” through change; second is the hold of history, which her son, Ewan, comes to regard above all else in *Grey Granite*: “He was one with them all, a long wail of sobbing mouths and wrung flesh, tortured and tormented by the world’s Masters while those Masters lied about Progress through Peace, Democracy, Justice, the Heritage of Culture” (*Scots Quair* 137).⁵ Where Chris returns to the “land” in the closing pages, Ewan embarks on a hunger

march to London. This division between the deep history that is indifferent to human agency and the history that is produced by it is prefigured throughout and has its attendant symbols, most prominently in *Sunset Song*, in the standing stones that look out over the village of Kinraddie. In one of the final passages of the trilogy, Chris and Ewan come to recognize the irreconcilable nature of this opposition: “It’s the old fight that maybe will never have a finish, whatever the names we give to it – the fight in the end between FREEDOM and GOD” (202). It seems that for both Gibbon and Barke the arrival of modernity and the transition from the “peasant folk” to the urban proletariat is best expressed across generations and as an endlessly renewed, and rearticulated, struggle to find meaning and purpose for those who came before; and all in the face of a consistently unforgiving universe.⁶ While these terms perhaps transcend the dialectic of romantic nationalism and socialist internationalism, the tension these poles encapsulate might be conceived as a possible response to the challenge set out in each of these novels. The appeals of a group belonging that has endured, that one inherits as a birthright, and that of a group belonging that casts one as an historical agent capable of affecting change are often contradictory *and* complementary.

Disaggregated Voices

If John Maclean stands as a symbol for this combination of political traditions, it is telling that Peter Stark of *No Mean City* (1935), the enormously popular and notoriously violent melodrama depicting life in the Gorbals of Glasgow in the 1920s, insists: “Ah don’t want to be a John MacLean or anything like that!’ . . . He thought MacLean was a saint and a martyr, but too impractical for everyday life. And he himself had no instinct for martyrdom” (McArthur and Long 225). More intelligent than his brother, Johnnie Stark the “Razor King,” Peter covets a different form of social aspiration: respectability over respect, an escape to the bourgeoisie rather than an ascent to folk-hero status. Despite his political sympathies, his aspirations, and his autodidacticism, Peter’s efforts at self-improvement prove to be no less futile than his brother’s. Indeed, as Sylvia Bryce-Wunder has argued, the novel’s characters dehumanize themselves in their efforts to reject the humiliations of poverty and circumstance. While this larger reality is invisible to Peter, his narrowed focus on survival bears an attendant skepticism and demands that Maclean’s communitarian ideals are admired but not pursued. The novel’s popular claim to authenticity was based substantially on its authorship: on Alexander McArthur, described in the

publicity as an unemployed worker who had lived in the Gorbals his entire life, and on the journalist, Kingsley Long. The large working class readership the book earned also served to validate the authors' appendix, which called upon newspaper excerpts as evidence: "the authors maintain that they have not drawn an exaggerated picture of conditions in the Glasgow tenements or of life as it is lived amongst the gangster element of the slum population" (McArthur and Long 314). Combined with the swift and often bewildering shifts in tone: from close observations of everyday spaces and routines, through sensationalist high drama, to the affected distance of the journalist (on sanitary conditions and public disorder) and the anachronistic sociologist (reflecting on the characteristics of the "slum mind") these claims to authenticity invite our scrutiny. How can the truth-value of a literary work reconcile these divergent sources: the lived impressionism, and the empirical reportage? Mediation and authenticity in the depiction of working class life in Glasgow, and the tensions that come with writing as one *of* as opposed to *for* this community, are issues that were revisited with meticulous self-awareness in the 1966 novel *The Dear Green Place*, by Archie Hind (1928–2008).

Following Mat Craig, an aspiring working class writer at turns liberated and trammled by his art and his work (and the tension between the two), the novel provides an intimate and humane portrait of the artist struggling with that designation and its purpose. The nation as romantic construction falls victim to a symbolic and caustic attack in an early scene at a New Year's party. Playing the bagpipes, Mat notes with disgust how easily he can manipulate his audience: a slow air produces a "soulful and woe-begone" look; a quick march incites them to become "staunch wee Scottish soldiers"; and "The Highland Cradle Song" makes them "weep for the sticky weans." Ending, cheekily, on "a few bars of a rumba, then a bit of an Orange song," he prompts a comic discussion over the politics of the pipes, the "Capitalistic and Imperialistic influence" instilled in the music historically, and speculation over the possibility of a "new Historical stage in pipe music" featuring such works as "Vladimir Ilyich's welcome to St Petersburg" and "Uncle Joes' Wee Cley Pipe." The historical contingency of this national symbol is laid bare, and politics and popular culture are riven. The scene ends with the drunk and injured on the streets, "viciousness and violence and a kind of bitter sentimentality" (Hind 37–40). Barke had his characters *reach for* Burns to point to an admired, if outmoded, radicalism. Whereas, Hind has Mat *subjected to* Burns in quotation. In this setting these nuggets of folk-wisdom stand only for the familiar frustrations of the working class, for limitations imposed from outside the community and for the

resignation that those circumstances engender. “Ye labour soon, ye labour late, / To feed the titled knave, man,” from “Tree of Liberty,” is invoked while Mat discusses the paltry holiday allowance at the slaughterhouse where he works (Hind 135). “Facts are chieftains that winna ding . . . [fellows that will not be overturned],” from “A Dream,” is set against his failure to provide for his family as he pursues his art (Hind 240).

The struggles faced by the working class writer are documented throughout, from the “nights of labor” demanded by the craft, and the economic pressures; to the relevance of bourgeois cultural constructions of the author and prescription of literary value to an artist speaking out of this community (see Rancière). But, so too, are the apparent struggles of the *Scottish* writer, whose national context provides only a “null blot, a cessation of life, a dull absence”: “The canny Scot with his deathly stultifying safety” as opposed to Mat’s vision of the writer as one who ought to “Shove [his world] into the violent torrent of events. Make things happen” (Hind 84). Faced with a nation and a class-community that seem anathema to this model of authorship, Mat despairs that even books that had “formed the basis of a practical dream,” by Marx or Shaw for example, were not deployed to change the world but were held among the working class as a “sentimentalised orthodoxy, a pathetic and futile hope for utopia” (Hind 208). In the closing pages, Mat’s inner conflict reaches its apogee. His troubles, of inspiration, aspiration, and conceptualization, shift and transform: the noble endeavors of the artist become the tawdry extravagance of a delusional, and vice-versa. The novel ends, as it begins, with the City of Glasgow’s coat of arms and the “piece of doggerel,” which describes it:

This is the tree that never grew,
This is the bird that never flew,
This is the fish that never swam,
This is the bell that never rang.
(Hind 10, 248)

This describes, rather enigmatically, the miracles of St. Mungo, patron saint of Glasgow, and it rings in Mat’s (and the reader’s) mind through the closing lines. While this might be read simply as a return to a kind of localism, and the belonging that comes with “home” and is rehearsed and reaffirmed in children’s rhymes, it might also provide us with potent imagery for the contradictory forces that have distinguished Mat’s life: the being without the doing, the dream that provides an identity but goes unrealized. Hind’s Mat is a child of Red Clydeside. Separated from his father’s struggle with

history by his ambition as a writer, his conflict has a focus at once more personal and more fundamental than that of Doug Craig (his father), Andrew Ramsay (*Land of the Leal*), or Ewan Tavendale (*A Scots Quair*). His conflict asks if the novel can sustain this burden of representation, while showing that, to do so, it must depict a creative impasse, and an ambitious failure.

In *Lean Tales* (1985), a collection of short stories by James Kelman (b. 1946), Agnes Owens (1926–2014), and Alasdair Gray (b. 1934), the experience of the working class subject is delineated altogether more violently. Its isolated and interiorized narratives are unapologetic about their resistance to interpretation. They are “lean” in the sense that they are trim and economical, but also lithe and nimble – not beholden to profound negotiations with history and tradition. Again, national mystification is confounded immediately. Kelman’s “Busted Scotch,” the opening story, sees a cabaret act at a casino in England, “a scotchman doing this harrylauder thing complete with kilt and trimmings,” in a bill also featuring “an Indian Squaw.”⁷ Hearing his accent, a female croupier identifies the narrator with the “scotch” performer (“one of your countrymen”), and, as if in response, he bets all of his wages on his first hand: “bust” (*Lean Tales* 13–14). The implied parity between these “native” performances, and the embarrassment that might only have been avoided, or embraced, with alcohol (“Fine if I had been drunk”), prompts him to take an inordinate risk, perhaps an attempt to prove his mastery over his fortune. His failure marks the first of many failures of the nation in this short story collection. As a model of identity politics capable of freeing or ennobling the Scottish working class, the nation falls woefully short. In “learning the Story,” the nation’s folk culture is further distanced from the landscapes and narratives it might once have conjured, as an “old lady under a bridge” plays the tune “Maxwelton Braes are Bonny” on her mouthorgan only to stop abruptly and commence to smoke her “Capstan full strength cigarettes” (*Lean Tales* 51–2).⁸ Kelman’s narrator recounts this event in detail, without explanation or judgment.

In Owens’s “Arabella” we are given more extensive access to our narrator’s worldview, though it diverges from the reality we come to recognize all the more dramatically. The titular character lives in squalor. She is illiterate, though she cultivates a reputation as a “healer” of considerable powers. We come to realize that the “magic,” or “treatment,” she proffers are in fact sex acts, given in return for contributions to the “money box” she keeps for her “children,” that is, for the dogs with whom she shares her home. The Sanitary Inspector who threatens to evict her is murdered, drowned in a barrel of her “potion” made up of “cow-dung, mashed snails or frogs, or whatever dead creature was handy.” The last word is given over entirely to Arabella’s

perspective: "As usual everything had worked out well for her" (*Lean Tales* 115, 119). In control of her own narrative and identity, she remains immune to the incursions of the state, to its representatives in public education and public health, and, by implication, to any broader group belonging. Hers is a story that ought to be unknowable, but that narrative fiction permits us to access. In "Fellow Travellers" Owens gives us a less self-assured character in Jean, who, sitting on the train, feels so besieged and scrutinized by the small talk of the others in the carriage that she disembarks and ends "going nowhere"; though we are left with the impression that such overwhelming feelings of directionlessness are widely shared, and only thinly veiled (*Lean Tales* 158). In "McIntyre," the eponymous union man and tenants' rights demonstrator comes to disappoint the narrator, who has long admired him: "he never understood that from many people's point of view smelly feet are worse than capitalism. Only to me it had been a comforting fault" (*Lean Tales* 165). Therefore, he who lives entirely in the struggle loses sight of the mundanities that make up so much of our conscious lives, and another avenue of group belonging, of political purpose, is found lacking.

Gray returns to Hind's concern with the Scottish working class artist in "A Report to the Trustees of the Bellahouston Travelling Scholarship," which purports to have been written by a young art student, and depicts a series of misadventures, illnesses, and debts, before arriving at the lesson: "My tour was spent in an effort to avoid the maturity gained from new experiences. Yet . . . that effort failed" (*Lean Tales* 212). Again, wisdom has come only with unattainable ambitions, inner conflict, self-sabotage, and a form of acknowledged failure. Gray maintains this metafictional bent in "Portrait of a Playwright," which describes the life and works of Joan Ure (1918–78), who wrote a story about

a woman with a talent, who feels it is too small to matter, suppresses it, and faints. She is pleased, for that suggests the talent is genuine. To be absolutely certain she hides it again. 'Very soon she coughed up the first gobbets of blood. And there she saw brilliant at last, the brightness of the tiny talent she had.' The woman dies rejoicing. She knows her talent is genuine, for it was death to hide it. (*Lean Tales* 250)

In representing the magnitude of this need for validation in one so brow-beaten, Gray/Ure constructs a model of individuated exploitation that runs so deeply as to connect the political and the creative endeavor in fundamental terms. Among Gray's final contributions to *Lean Tales* are the short pieces "The Grumbler" and the "Decision," both of which speak to the powerlessness of the subject. In the first, a man who has everything he

wants cannot find happiness, and, in the second, a young woman thinks that to “decide” not to have children is enough: “I don’t take precautions when I decide not to have a cigarette, why take precautions when I decide not to have a baby?” (*Lean Tales* 277).

Finally, Gray’s “Ending,” which is one sentence in length, reads: “Having beguiled with fiction until I had none left I resorted to facts, which also ran out” (*Lean Tales* 281). The speaker has neither fictions nor facts. If there is nothing left to be stated that he or she knows to be true or knows not to be true, only approximation and speculation remains. An understanding of this dilemma helps us to read *Lean Tales*, and the works of Kellman, Owens, and Gray, more generally. The “truths” of these shorn and stark narratives as measured against history, or understood in the context of nationality or class, is an irrelevance. Though “clannish confines” have been continually transcended in the works of these later writers, and any claim to group belonging is greeted, rightly, with suspicion and scrutiny, even the disaggregated voice of the individual does not go altogether unaffected by these inheritances. As we can glean from the common concern among these working class writers over the forces that press upon and seek to define, control, or otherwise exploit us, even as we reject “clannish” behavior, we only come up against other “confines” more difficult to discern and to combat.

This chapter began with a mid-twentieth-century product of the folk revival and the Scottish literary renaissance, one that very self-consciously coordinates the local, the national, and the universal. Though the national framework has, in the postmodern period, earned the distrust with which it is handled, “Glasclune and Drumlochy” serves as an example of the ways in which “clannish” divides are a perpetual, if tragic, presence in history. In light of this, we might come to see MacDiarmid’s poetics as one that faces up to this fact, rather than evading it. The politics of a combined romantic nationalism and socialist internationalism must, by definition, inhabit this tension between the inward and the outward perspective. It must also, in turn, negotiate between the elitism that comes with interpreting and representing cultural history and setting out its future, and the populism that is risked in any appeal to “the people.” In adopting and adapting the folk tradition and the Scots vernacular, poets like MacDiarmid and Soutar risked eliding class difference by reinforcing a common “folk” inheritance, but each in his way acknowledges this difficulty: the former by unapologetically situating himself “whaur extremes meet,” (MacDiarmid, *Poems* I: 87) and the latter, by his vicariousness. Where the 1930s realist epics of Gibbon and Barke enter a dialogue with history, postwar writers were to embrace disaggregated voices, relinquishing their claim to speak for the community.

The lives they choose to depict make scant claims beyond themselves but respond in their idiosyncrasies to the same historical pressures. In so doing, they radically democratize the literary, validating diverse voices by scrutinizing the limits of their creative conceit. The “confines” that bear down upon these voices, though less “clannish,” are exposed as no less parochial, and no less insular, and all the more inescapable for it.

NOTES

1. The title of one of MacDiarmid’s essays published in T. S. Eliot’s *Criterion* in 1931.
2. *OED*: “a low or vulgar boy; a street-loafer.”
3. For a selection of the exchanges in these latter-day “flytings,” see Henderson, *Armstrong* 117–41.
4. In a letter to Gibbon, Barke heaped praises on *Sunset Song* and compared it, in its stature and in the eagerness with which he read it, to *The Communist Manifesto*. In reply, Gibbon expressed his pleasure at the comparison and applauds Barke in turn: “there is at least one soul in Scotland unspotted by this dreary rash of nationalism” (McCulloch 90–93).
5. The most frequently cited passage describing this aspect is Ewan’s comrade, Jim Trease’s exclamation: “A hell of a thing to be History, Ewan!” (Gibbon, *Grey Granite* 147).
6. See Timothy C. Baker, who formulates this dialectic as that between “romance” and “realism” in response to modernity.
7. Harry Lauder (1870–1950) was a hugely successful music hall and vaudeville performer.
8. A once popular brand of unfiltered cigarettes in the UK renowned for their markedly high tar and nicotine content, and associated with only the most dedicated of smokers.