

LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON AND HISTORY: THE SHAMELESS STONE OF SISYPHUS



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The world's sought faith for thousands of years and found only death or unease in them. Yours is just another dark cloud to me —or a great rock you're trying to push up a hill. (Gibbon 1946: 495)

THE untimely death of James Leslie Mitchell (1901-1935) deprived Britain of a promising novelist. However brief and compressed within only five years, his career produced over fifteen books, including two masterpieces: *Spartacus* (1933) and the trilogy *A Scots Quair* (1932-34), written under his Scottish pseudonym, Lewis Grassic Gibbon. The projects he left unfinished may give an idea of the nature and wide scope of his interests: a *Story of Civilization*, a *Story of Religion*, a biography of the Scottish national hero William Wallace, a long historical novel about the Covenanters, and an ideological autobiography entitled *Memoirs of a Materialist*. The comparison quoted above from the last pages of *A Scots Quair*, of its hero's struggle to the Sisyphean task of pushing a great rock up a hill, profoundly suits the man whom his biographer describes in his last days, his health collapsing under gastric trouble as much as overwork, still "desperately using his limited

strength in unnecessary efforts to persuade publishers to commission more work when he could not cope with what he had" (Munro 1966: 202). The urge to write became tragically straining for an author who regarded writing as a momentous ideological enterprise.

Some generalizing misconceptions that have affected Mitchell's works are related to the sweeping political statements he made, such as "all great literature is propaganda" (Munro 1966: 106). Even *A Scots Quair* has sometimes been regarded as committed Communist writing,¹ failed Scottish Nationalism,² or absolutely permeated by his Diffusionist ideas.³ More recently, he has begun to come into his own by being related to "those modern European writers from Kafka and Sartre to Camus and Beckett who have made high art out of the belief in the inherent hopelessness and incoherence of the human condition" (Malcolm 1984: 174). An approach to human reality that only a few years later might have been called existentialist is, in our opinion, the starting point for an improved understanding of the author's politics, and not the other way round.

The keys to the ideas behind Mitchell's fiction are best sought in his minor novels, and particularly in his largely autobiographical *The Thirteenth Disciple* (1931). Its hero Malcolm Maudslay, like his creator and fictional editor of his memoirs, comes from a peasant family of Aberdeenshire. The narration opens with Malcolm's memory of how, at the age of five, he set out to commit suicide. Significantly, the idea of suicide is also at opening of Albert Camus's *Le Mythe de Sisyphe* (1942), the collection of essays in which he expounded for the first time in full his philosophy of the Absurd, which can be defined as man's anguished awareness of the gulf between himself and the world (Camus 1942: 20). What prevents Malcolm from drowning himself is precisely a sudden consciousness "of the long wall of the autumn day . . ." and "of the wonder of the horizon" (Mitchell 1981: 14). Unlike Camus, however, Mitchell's hero does not dwell upon the problem itself, but, rather like the later Sartre, tries to find a positive solution in militancy, or, as Mitchell (1981: 15) puts it, in "an incredible adventure."

Mitchell bases Malcolm's adventurous life on the Diffusionist belief⁴ in a Golden Age of happy primitive hunters before the spread of agriculture that ended, as the author explains in his essay "The Antique Scene", with "the beliefs and practices, the diggings and plantings and indignations and shadowy revilements of Archaic Civilization" (Gibbon and MacDiarmid 1934: 20). Hence Malcolm begins to make sense of life by observing the landscape of his native valley of Leekan, a place without recorded history

except for a medieval legend about Wallace, but rich with pre-historic evidence. The " 533), a Bronze Age circle of standing stones, is meant to stand for the advent of civilization, which he regards as "no progress from the beast, but a mind-tumour and disease" (132). For Mitchell, this first sign of civilization corresponds to what Camus would call "The Absurd Walls" in the title of the second chapter of *Sisyphé* (1942: 26-47), in other words, the only precise knowledge that remains once man has found himself at the centre of the "colourless desert" of his existence, "where all certainties have turned into stone" (1942: 44).

Camus's *désert sans couleurs* can be compared to peasant life in *Thirteenth Disciple*, "a grey, grey life. Dull and grey in its routine . . . " (Mitchell 1981: 23). Agrarian life since the Neolithic is envisaged by Mitchell as the first stage of decay after the loss of primeval plenitude. However, in the Scottish peasantry he finds a remnant of the primitive spirit, akin to the one that inspired Wallace's struggle against English domination: "Except in romantic novels of claymores and stag-hunting and bonnie brier bushes, the Scottish tenant farmer keeps his immortal soul intact by markedly not raising his hat to the northern equivalent of squire" (1981: 18). These ideas, which are related to the view of national culture in the Scottish Literary Renaissance,⁵ will be central in his conception of *A Scots Quair*. The crucial moment of the present novel, as that of the trilogy, comes as the peasant moves into the city.

For Mitchell large cities are modern civilization par excellence. When Malcolm recalls his early days in Glasgow, "that strange deplorable city, . . . the vomit of a cataleptic commercialism" (1981: 67-8), he sees himself as "merely the Old Stone Age wanderer, astray and unresting with dream-blinded eyes" (1981: 123). This experience is narrated in a chapter entitled "The Walls of the World", which brings Camus's *murs absurdes* to mind. It also bears witness to the generation of British intellectuals of the 1930s, their disenchantment with post-war politics, and their shift from the utopian socialism of William Morris and H. G. Wells to extreme leftist positions. Malcolm, "out on his adventure against the World's Walls" (1981: 73), wavers between National Socialism and Marxism until he falls under the influence of two prophetic characters, a woman of Cro-Magnon features called Domina, and Metaxa, a "philosophic anarchist" and expert on the Maya, who acts as the author's Diffusionist mouthpiece. They point to him an "Adventure beyond the imagination of the orthodox socialist" (1981: 85), "beyond the Walls of the World [where] there's the flame of a splendid

Light" (1981: 138), also called "the Expedition of Consciousness against the dead universe —and the Thing behind it" (1981: 196). Thus what the novel presents as an escape from the absurd is in fact a new quest for El Dorado, the City of the Sun where the Maya "may have attempted and failed a civilization to escape the horrors of civilization" (1981: 154). The hero dies in the course of his impossible quest, and the novel ends with no hint of a solution to his conflicts.

The Thirteenth Disciple may not hold water as a novel, yet on the whole it is an interesting reflection on the angst of its author's time, besides providing a very complete introduction to the recurrent motifs and ideas of his novels.⁶ Escapism finally prevails in it, as in several of his other minor pieces. It was one of two likely responses in a generation who were, like the heroine of another of Mitchell's novels, haunted by what they read daily in the newspapers, "with their dreary listings of tariffs and bickerings, strikes and hunger marches, mounted police charges on London unemployed, the drowsy mummings of the English parliament, the growing poverty and cumulating horror of a civilisation in the agonies of every civilisation's contradictions. War and the rumours of war again... Hunger and murder and famine coming on seven-league boots, the beasts and savages of civilisation gathering under the swastika flag . . ." (Mitchell 1989: 10). The other typical response was political commitment. Mitchell's epic novel *Spartacus* is a clear-cut statement of how far he would go as a committed writer, and a fine critique of the making of History.

Spartacus is historically based on the episode of the rebellion of slaves against the Roman State that Plutarch relates in his *Life of Crassus*. Malcolm Maudslay's urge for an expedition against the World's Walls here receives a defined shape in a real adventure against the walls of the city of Rome, which in the novel adopts all the negative attributes of civilization in the Diffusionist sense: Rome, "the City of the Masters" (Mitchell 1990: 140), "the Violent City" (1990: 32), and, above all, "that Beast that would tear and devour the unborn" (1990: 201), utterly opposed to the Natural Life of Man embodied in the slaves as a whole, and particularly in Spartacus. At the same time the choice of this subject has a political meaning for Mitchell, one of whose early poems was dedicated to the murder of the leaders of the Spartacist Rising of German Communists in 1919.⁷ He said he was as deeply moved by the crucifixion of the Spartacist slaves "a hundred years before the crucifixion of Christ" (this is a point he emphasizes by repeating it at the beginning and at the end of *Spartacus*, 1990: 3, 210), as by the torture and

killing of the Covenanters in seventeenth-century Scotland or "the face of a ragged tramp" of his own days (Gibbon and MacDiarmid 1934: 304).

Mitchell's approach to Spartacus is, at first sight, one of an orthodox Marxism. In his *Grundrisse* (Moscow, 1939-41) Marx presents Spartacus as an archetypal proletarian hero, and Terry Eagleton's comment may apply to Mitchell's novel: "We respond to Spartacus or Greek sculpture because our own history links us to those ancient societies; we find in them an undeveloped phase in the forces that condition us, and a primitive image of 'measure' between man and Nature which Capitalist society necessarily destroys, and which socialist society can reproduce at an incomparably higher level" (Eagleton 1976: 13). Indeed, Spartacus reminds his woman Elpinice of a Greek statue (Mitchell 1990: 21), and there is a moment in which he appears larger than life, in the eyes of a Roman observer, like a marble God or a proletarian hero in a propagandist poster of the 1930s: "he [Gnaeus Manlius] saw more than the Strategos Spartacus, he saw THE SLAVE himself" (128) (capitals as in the original). The relentless crudity in which Mitchell describes gory details of battles and the depravity of the Romans would have upset Georg Lukács, who complained about the same in Flaubert's *Salammô*, one of Mitchell's favourite novels, saying that "There is never any humanity in this suffering; it is simply horrible, senseless torment" (Lukács 1981: 229). But, in the famous debate that took place between Lukács and Brecht during the 1930s (see Eagleton 1976: 24), most modern Marxists would differ from Lukács's opinion, and agree with Bertold Brecht's (and Mitchell's) idea of art as a means to expose the contradictory and violent aspects of a society in need of radical transformation.

Nevertheless, Mitchell did not like to regard himself, nor his art, as Communist; rather, as "anarchist" (Malcolm 1984: 25). This he makes clear through the leading characters of *Spartacus*. The protagonist himself never says anything that could be regarded as a political manifesto. Most significantly, he hardly ever utters a word at all, even though he is called "a voice for the many, the Voice of the voiceless" (Mitchell 1990: 194). He is mostly presented through others, and he is markedly a man with no history before being enslaved as a gladiator, because he suffers amnesia due to a sword wound. It is the Greek ex-noble Hiketas that presents Spartacus, not as a Thracian like official history has him, but as a man from beyond Scythia, where the Golden Age still flourished (1990: 58-9); and it is the Greek intellectual Kleon that gives him a political purpose. But Kleon is an embittered man whom the Romans have rendered an eunuch. He stabbed and mutilated his master in retaliation, and ran away with a copy of Plato's

Republic to join the rebels (1990: 3). As the brain of the rebellion Kleon might seem an idealist in comparison with another of the leaders, the pragmatic Jewish aristocrat Gershom who sneers at his plans of "a Republic in the skies" (1990: 71) after the defeat of Rome. But the "eunuch literatus" (1990: 12) is spiritually as well as physically maimed. He is moved by hatred against Rome (1990: 4), and unable to shed tears of compassion as Spartacus does. He begrudges the child that Spartacus is going to have, and secretly rejoices over the death of the baby and its mother Elpinice, because this loss makes the leader throw himself the more desperately at the onslaught on Rome. In short, through Kleon the novel implies the danger and contradiction of turning the great myth of Spartacus into mere ideology.⁸

The character of Kleon echoes doubts about Communism that Mitchell expressed from his first novel, *Stained Radiancy* (1930). At the end of *Stained Radiancy* James Storman resigns from the "Anarchocommunist Party of Great Britain" alleging that in Stalinist Russia, "I saw the same aimless enslavement to an archaic economic machine; I saw a ruling class —the Communist Party— in power —a class differing in no fundamentals from those ruling elsewhere" (Mitchell 1993: 209), and concluding that "Mob salvation is a proven lie" (1993: 210), while he hopes that his son, "his immortality", would "presently bear out into the world a torch to add to . . . the Light that men call by many names, by the names of Freedom and Knowledge, of Anarchy and of God" (1993: 212). By contrast John Garland, with a mutilated hand and recently bereaved of a baby, finally accepts the secretaryship of the Party "just to hit back" because he has "grown bitter" (215). Spartacus suspects the philosophy that inspires Kleon, because there are also slaves in Plato's Republic, though he rather naively approves of the "Lex Servorum" that Kleon has drafted (Mitchell 1990: 136), seemingly his plan for a dictatorship of the proletariat. In Communism Mitchell admired the means of revolution to put an end to the cruelties of a civilization that would allow even babies to die, but he distrusts its political ends: he thought that Revolution, too, ultimately devours its own children. The orthodox Marxist reader of *Spartacus* may be surprised at the end of the novel, when the dying Kleon, contemplating Spartacus's agony on the cross, has a vision of the crucified Christ superimposed on the image of Spartacus gladius in hand. An "image" of suffering and rebellion turning into a "superscription" of universal love was also the final message of another novel Mitchell had written in the same year of *Spartacus*, *Image and Superscription* (Munro 1966: 106).

Spartacus represents the ideal of humanity that Mitchell imagined in primitive men, "Christians it seemed to him without Christianity" (Malcolm 1984: 29). He is also the kind of hero Joseph Cambell defines as "the champion of things becoming",⁹ that is, a positive force of Nature as opposed to the ravages of human History. As the embodiment of the rebellion of slaves the statuesque but dynamic Spartacus is a Sisyphian stone, and Kleon is his Sisyphus, the main spokesman of the absurd.¹⁰ From the start Kleon knows, like Macbeth in the last act of Shakespeare's tragedy, that "there were neither Gods nor beginnings nor ends, plan in the blood and pain of birth, plan in the blood and pain of death, only an oft-told tale that went on and knew neither reason nor rhythm nor right" (Mitchell 1990: 5). Yet he carries on with his dream of the "Sky-Republic" and with the rebellion to its tragic end just because, as an outlawed slave, he has no alternative. He is painfully aware of History and of the fact that "a time would come when historians told of this revolt, and figure the Thracian as a wild barbarian, sure of himself if dim of a plan" (1990: 151-2). He tries to give the revolt a plan, to write another history, and fails. However, even if he had succeeded, the negative traits of his personality (his barrenness, his hatred...) suggest that things would have been much the same, only with some new men as masters and the old masters as slaves.

The previous discussion of the leading ideas in Mitchell's novels provides a sufficient background for the analysis of his most complex work, *A Scots Quair*. Besides revealing in full the Scottish identity and concerns of the writer, the trilogy introduces three new narrative elements: (a) a collective narrative voice; (b) an articulate heroine; (c) a cyclic form.

a) The heavily omniscient narrator of a novel like *Thirteenth Disciple* which expressed the author's opinions too narrowly is now replaced by a stereoscopic outlook on events, which are narrated in free indirect style. There is a collective voice that represents the dominant ideology in each of the three novels of the trilogy, from the Aberdeenshire Scots dialect of the first one to a more anglicized and urban idiom in the third, while the main characters have an individualized voice.¹¹

b) The one constant voice is that of the only character appearing in the three novels, Chris Guthrie. However, she is no cliché character like Domina in *Thirteenth Disciple* and most of Mitchell's other feminine creations. Mitchell's adoption of his pseudonym Lewis Grassic Gibbon from his own mother's maiden name, Liliass Grassic Gibbon, was an apt choice for creating a character like Chris: it has been argued that Gibbon displays "features and

devices that are absolutely commonplace" "in poetry and prose by women, and certainly in explicitly feminist work",¹² and also that "the whole Gibbon personality is intensely feminine".¹³ Thus enabled to observe a markedly male-made history, Chris is articulate both in her voice and personality, and we see her evolving with the historical experience she has mainly through the men in her life: her father, her two husbands, and her son.

c) The form of the trilogy itself reflects the combination of permanence and change embodied in the heroine. It combines the linear development of History with a cyclic evolution imitating Nature. Each novel has a quaternary structure that brings its progression full circle: thus *Sunset Song*, taking its progression from the agrarian ritual, begins with a prelude called "The Unfurrowed Field", and then goes through "Ploughing", "Drilling", "Seedtime" and "Harvest", to end back at "The Unfurrowed Field", which is, again, the title of its epilogue; *Cloud Howe*, in turn, adopts the progression of clouds from lowest to highest density and probability of rainfall (Cirrus-Cumulus-Stratus-Nimbus), and *Grey Granite* represents the progressive solidification of granitic rock (Epidote-Sphene-Apatite-Zircon).

While admitting that too much attention to the allegorical aspects of *A Scots Quair* may be to the detriment of interesting human and social aspects of the work,¹⁴ we must acknowledge that the *Quair* is as firmly inlaid with symbolism as a modernist poem could be, and that its symbols are hardly more independent from its meaning than they would be in such a poem. Furthermore, they are central to an understanding of the author's view of history. The titles of the three novels represent, not only their respective subjects, but also the main recurrent motifs throughout the trilogy, and the progression of elements in Gibbon's materialist approach. *Sunset Song* is a lament for the end of the traditional spirit of the Scottish peasantry, which is seen as expressed by their folk-songs, and as dying at World War I; here we glimpse, especially through Chris's brief rural idyll with her husband Ewan Tavendale, "the splendour of life like a song, like the wind" (Gibbon 1946: 300). From the pure air of wind and song we move into something increasingly more solid in *Cloud Howe*, as the vapour of clouds gradually turns into the water of rain, and the socialist ideals fail, as it were, falling like rain at the 1926 General Strike, on which Chris's second husband, the Reverend Robert Colquhoun, spends the hope that kept him alive. Finally, in *Gray Granite* there is the progressive hardening of Chris's son (named Ewan after his father) as he is suffering the effects of the early 1930s world crisis, until his conversion to Communism. This process of transformation of

wind into rock points forcefully to an ultimate significance in the fact that, at the end of it all, Chris says that her son seems to be pushing a great rock up a hill, and then retires to rest, perhaps to die, on another rock.

A few other significant threads of Gibbon's historical fabric must be unravelled before reaching its ultimate Sisyphean stance. Rocks of many kinds are ever present in the trilogy. They are part of the buildings and ruins often described in its pages. Ancient Standing Stones on a hill dominate the farm of Blawerie in the village of Kinraddie, to which Chris's family had to move from a better farm in Cairndhu because her father, John Guthrie, a stern Scotch Presbyterian proud of his peasant stock, had quarrelled with his former landlord. Guthrie dislikes the Stones, "coarse, foul things, the folk that raised them were burning in hell" (Gibbon 1946: 43), but for Chris they are the place "where ever she could come and stand back a little from the clamour of the days" (1946: 89). As the remnants of the first civilization and its bloody religious rites, the old stone circle provides a trans-historical perspective on current events. The ruins of Dunnottar Castle, which Chris visits on her first date with Ewan, are likewise a reminder of the torture and execution of the old Covenanters, who throughout the *Quair* stand for truly revolutionary Scots that, in 1685, gave their lives in a war for their national ideas and their peasant class disguised beneath religious motivations.¹⁵

Religion was of paramount importance in Scottish history, and so it is in the *Quair*. While denouncing the superstitious and oppressive side of all religions, Gibbon acknowledges the powerful political legacy of "the God of old Scotland fighting on the side of the people since the days of John Knox" (Gibbon 1946: 82). It is both the grandeur and the misery of John Guthrie: it makes him meddle in his son's life until he feels compelled to migrate; harass and abuse his wife sexually until she kills herself to avoid the pain of a twin childbirth, and even attempt to rape his own daughter. Chris feels relieved and free when her father dies, but it is from him mainly that she inherits her peasant spirit, just as she receives her intimacy with Nature from her unfortunate mother. Later she suffers a comparable kind of degrading lust from her husband Ewan, after he has been morally corrupted by his training as a soldier (1946: 170). When Ewan and other peasants are beguiled by jingoism into fighting and dying at World War I, their tragedy is given its full significance through a sermon pronounced by the new Reverend Colquhoun before the Standing Stones. In his incoming sermon he had quoted the words the ancient Caledonian chieftain Calgacus against Rome's imperial policy, to denounce the British government's war policy: "They have made a desert and

they call it peace" (1946: 189). Now he uncovers an inscription to commemorate the death of the socialist peasant Chae Strachan which, placed upon one of the great stones, recalls the one commemorating the Covenanters at Dunnotar Castle. The bagpipe tune "The Flowers of the Forest", originally the lament for the death of the Scots at the battle of Flodden against England in 1513, closes the final ceremony. Through these among other details Gibbon shapes a pattern in which history, taking different forms but always leading to a sacrifice of the folk for an oppressive civilization, repeats itself destructively as if moved by "the grinding mills of God."¹⁶

The struggle goes on in *Cloud Howe*, a novel which dramatizes a chapter of Scottish history that T.C. Smout suitably calls "The Rise and Fall of Socialist Idealism" (Smout 1986: 255-75), just the kind of idealism that clouds symbolize in Gibbon's work. Chris, whose peasant husband died at the Great War, is now married to the Reverend Robert Colquhoun. Robert is the son of an old idealist reverend who had preached about the Golden Age of prehistory and its possible return (1946: 52), but who had been displaced by the drunken demagogue Reverend Gibbon, a supporter of official propaganda who presented the Kaiser as the Antichrist and the Great War as a godly crusade (1946: 149). Thus the arrival of Robert to the kirk after Gibbon's death had brought some hope for humane religion at the end of *Sunset Song*. Robert is one of those Kirk ministers that the author described as "champions against lairds and factors and such-like fauna" in his essay "Religion" (Gibbon and MacDiarmid 1934: 321). His true god being Humanity, he is only an actual believer in God in his moments of weakness. Through his struggle for social reform we are presented with the mostly grotesque tableau of the people from the small industrial town of Segget, which has replaced the rural setting with feudal traits of the previous novel. It is a class-ridden society where the main opposed groups are the weavers, a traditional working class with bourgeois aspirations, and the spinners, imported workers with radical tendencies.

There is an episode in *Cloud Howe* that comprises much of the symbolism pervading the trilogy. On a Sabbath morning MacDougall the postmaster, a man with a zest for blood and patriotic songs, is conducting his choir of the Salvation Army when they meet a very different choral group on the square of Segget: that of the revolutionary spinners singing their red songs. Songs were the true expression of an enriching natural tradition in *Sunset Song*, but in the present novel they have become a crude expression of ideology; thus the evangelical hymns of the Salvation Army and the red ones

of the spinners are the two extremes between which Colquohoun wavers. Furthermore the episode interlaces the image of songs with that of the rock: the workers's leader Jock Cronin urges his choir to shout down MacDougall's, and defies him to move a mountain with his faith, as the Gospels say they could do; infuriated at such humiliations, MacDougall makes his men sing the biblical hymn "Rock of the Ages" at the top of their voices, but it is Jock Cronin's final derisive cry that lingers about the novel: "Where is the rock of your faith?" (1946: 234). It is no coincidence that in the next episode Chris discovers in her son Ewan something "hard and shining and unbreaking as rock, something like a sliver of granite within him" (1946: 235). Hence these episodes project great expectations on the character of a boy who is brought up amidst these limits, the son of true Scottish peasants, and the stepson of a socialist minister of the Kirk.

From his pulpit and in his labour as minister Colquohoun promotes his "League of the willing folk of Segget" (1946: 230), its name perhaps a parody of William Morris's Socialist League, which was one of the bases of the British Labour Party. In one of his most inspired sermons he compares his people with Samson and the landlord family of Mowat with the Philistines, but nobody seems impressed (1946: 214-5), and, as it turns out, it is Colquohoun who, blinded by his faith in Socialism and the human race, presently appears to be an absurd Samson bringing down the whole Philistine temple of Segget on himself to no avail.

In the sermon that closes *Cloud Howe*, preached when he is sick to death in body and mind at people's cruelty and lack of solidarity, at the severe decline of people's interest in religion, and at the failure of Labour politics in the hands of Ramsay MacDonald,¹⁷ Colquohoun renounces his utopian socialism and calls for "a stark, sure creed that will cut like a knife, a surgeon's knife through the doubt and disease -men with unclouded eyes may yet find it . . ." (1946: 350).¹⁸ That he is somewhat ideologically maimed and barren like Kleon in *Spartacus* is suggested by his gradual detachment from Chris, who "counted for little with Robert, compared with his cloudy hopings and God" (1946: 312). He is ultimately to blame for the abortion that Chris suffers while he is wasting his last energies in the agitation of the General Strike. The lung disease he had from the Great War only healed in proportion to his socialist hopes, and it finally kills him. His agonized sermon with its implicit appeal to healing violence is at odds with the one he had preached to launch his campaign on Segget, when he still hoped that good will could put an end to the violence and hatred of History, inspired by the blade of a

Bronze Age spear that little Ewan had brought from one of his lonely wanderings on the hills (1946: 240).

Grey Granite narrates the psychic process through which Ewan would come to the "stark creed" that his stepfather had finally preached. The novel, set near the previous two in a fictional city called Duncairn, analyses what George Steiner called "that explicit myth of the human condition and the goals of history which we call Marxism."¹⁹ Grassie Gibbon alters actual historical chronology in order to bring dramatic scenes from the mythic "Red Clyside" of 1919, when Glasgow "had come within an ace of revolution" (Smout 1986: 259), to the 1930s crisis. Ewan moves into Duncairn with Chris, who is now running a guest house, and he finds a job at the steel factory of Gowans and Gloag's, whose initials are probably meant to coincide with "Grey Granite", in turn recalling a feature of Duncarin's architecture (many of its buildings are made of this material, like those in Aberdeen), as well as the hero's inner quality.

During his childhood in the previous novel Ewan is presented through the eyes of his mother, for instance when he uses a Scots word when his English fails him, and she proudly muses: "he'd do strange things yet in the world, Ewan, who hadn't a God and hadn't a faith and took not a thing on earth for granted . . . he was one of the few who might save the times, watching the Ice and winter come . . . , unfrightened, with quiet, cold eyes" (1946: 339). He appears isolated and safe from the surrounding world by his liking for books about prehistory, his collection of flints, and his contemptuous indifference for culture and politics. Thus the author makes him his characteristic type of noble savage in modern life, much like the hero of *Thirteenth Disciple* and "nine-tenths of the intelligent men and women in the after-War years" (Mitchell 1931: 244). However, the young man's transformation is presented more logically in *Grey Granite*. Belief in the Golden Age, which had been filtering unobtrusively into the trilogy from the preaching of Robert Colquhoun's father, is made to converge quietly with Ewan's precocious attraction to the song "Red Flag" (1946: 270), the bitter experience of his family, the Scottish spirit of the old Covenanters (1946: 464), and the legend of the revolutionary John MacLean²⁰ to make up the Communist hero of the novel.

The story of Ewan, however, is not "overtly propagandist writing" as Johnson claimed,²¹ because it entails a tragic flaw. At first he refuses to have anything to do with the socialist ideas of his girlfriend Ellen Johns, even though she insists that, according to his angry feelings towards history as

symbolized in the stones of an old Pict fort, he must be a Socialist (1946: 386-7). However, Chris soon begins to doubt the grey granite core of her son, who, she had thought, "would never be touched by any wing of the fancies of men" (1946: 399). He does not want to see himself as part of his workmates' History (1946: 404-5), until the day he visits the local Museum only to find that there was a head of Caesar but none of Spartacus, and that all the "the poor folk since history began, bedevilled and murdered, trodden underfoot, . . . hungered, unfed, with their darkened brains, their silly revenges, their infantile hopes . . ." are missing from the pictures (1946: 406-7). And then "you gave a queer sob that startled yourself: Something was happening to you: God —what?" (1946: 406). Thus the novel presents Ewan's conversion to what Ma Cleghorn, a wise character in her simplicity, calls "this daft Red religion" (1946: 417). From then on he attends Marxist quasi-religious ceremonies and takes a leading part in labour strife, renouncing his own being to become what he calls "History" (1946: 473).

Chris is the only one who shows a clear consciousness of herself and the world, especially in those moments in which she is able to detach herself from history and observe it more cold-heartedly: in her lonely walks in solitary places and when she looks at herself in the mirror. In one of these episodes, as she realises that Ewan is slipping away from her, she expresses her only real belief: "nothing in the world she'd ever believed in but change, unceasing and unstaying as time" (1946: 429). In contrast Ewan has given himself over to the belief in a myth that gives history the shape and goal that it does not really have. Thus Ewan takes the tragic road to self-immolation to God under a new mask, the road that Chris's father and her two husbands had taken before. The results of this are reflected in his changed attitude towards his girlfriend, which, like the reactions of the other three men towards Chris in their moment of decline, bespeaks sexual degradation: Ewan rejects Ellen together with her Labour Party politics calling her "a filthy name, considering, the name a keelie [a rough male city-dweller] gives to a leering whore" (1946: 490), even though before his conversion he had despised that same callousness of keelies towards girls (1946: 389). As Deirdre Burton points out, "it is that recourse to the irrelevant insults of sexuality that finally marks Ewan out as the person of limited vision . . . — both personal and political".²² In his pose we may feel the symbolical barrenness of Kleon again, in spite of Ewan's efforts to identify himself with Spartacus or with Christ, because in order to become History and aspiring to a mystic communion with the suffering and down-trodden, he renounces

freedom, compassion and love. What Chris thought of her father's death, "only God had beaten him in the end" (1946: 95), may now apply to her son, the last victim of History in *A Scots Quair*.

Ewan's often quoted words as he makes his farewell to his mother on joining the Hunger March to London sum up an essential subject of the trilogy, and bring the narration to a necessary close:²³ "There will always be you and I, I think, Mother. 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" (495) (capitals as in the original). Since to some extent Chris stands for the land of the Scots,²⁴ by leaving her Ewan is forsaking his Scottish self, and with it his individuality and freedom.²⁵ In still another sense their parting also suggests the "schism in the soul" that Arnold J. Toynbee found in disintegrating civilizations.²⁶ Ewan, whose great human mistake is paradoxically to dehumanize himself, might have been like the Nietzschean *Übermensch* after the death of God, had he turned his eyes towards Mother Earth (Chris's *Geist*).²⁷ Instead, he turns away from Scotland and yields to a new God, the Marxist myth. Karl Marx himself had betrayed his own materialism by mystifying history; for example, in *The German Ideology* Marx wrote that "the truly historical appears to be separated from ordinary life, something extra-superterrestrial" (ed. Tucker 1978: 165). When Spartacus says that "There's a God in men. But an Unknown God" (Mitchell 1990: 195), it seems a warning against giving too definite a shape to history, as, for example, when the Nazi ideology turned Nietzschean philosophy into *Realpolitik*.

The words of Chris that prompt Ewan's "Freedom and God" speech and serve as epigraph to the present article, epitomize Mitchell's view of history just as meaningfully. Communism, then, turns out to be the rock of Ewan's faith, not unlike his grandfather's Presbyterianism or his stepfather's Utopian Socialism. All Chris can see in it is something like the stone of Sisyphus. Thus the predicament of Mitchell's heroes parallels that of the Greek hero. In Robert Graves's words: "As soon as he has almost reached the summit, [Sisyphus] is forced back by the weight of the shameless stone, which bounces to the very bottom once more; where he wearily retrieves it and must begin all over again, though sweat bathes his limbs, and a cloud of dust rises above his head."²⁸ Chris is wiser, but wearier of life. All she can do is return to her native Cairndhu and rest on a *natural* stone, accepting "that Change who ruled the earth and the sky and the waters underneath the earth, . . . Change whose right hand was Death and whose left hand Life, might be

stayed by none of the dreams of men . . . , gods or devils or wild crying to the sky" (496). This last warning against dreamy idealizations of history was especially significant at the time *A Scots Quair* was written, when political bigotry disguised as idealism threatened Europe, and would soon lead into a new World War.

Time was up against both Grassic Gibbon and his heroine. In *Grey Granite* Chris abandons a projected marriage with her old friend Ake Ogilvie because she already feels too old and attached to her past for a third marriage (1946: 468-9). Interestingly, Ake Ogilvie is a Liberal. Hence this character, a remarkable insight on the part of the author, invites the reader to wonder how the *Quair* would have continued with him as the hero. Yet Mitchell belonged to a generation who had experienced what appeared to be the ultimate failure of Liberalism,²⁹ and he died far too soon to witness to the success of the Labour Party in Britain after World War II, the fall of European Communist systems, and the "End of History" with the recent rise of Neoliberalism.³⁰

Mitchell sympathized with none of the major British political parties because he saw them as too complacent about cruelty and social injustice, and he distrusted the Fascist elements he saw in the nationalist parties of Scotland.³¹ His sympathies were decidedly leftist: for him as for Chris, life is the left hand of Change; rather than with any party, they lay with a peculiarly Scottish nonconformity embodied in the Communist Ewan, the tragic hero with the serious flaw of becoming an unfeeling bigot. Worse still, Ewan allows himself to be enslaved by a God and so lose his humanity. This distinguishes him from Camus's godless Sisyphus. Nevertheless, he is to be admired for his courage and strength, for his anger at the injustice of human history, and for being a living force of Change. It is the strength of living characters that makes Grassic Gibbon's work a great cultural study of his time and country.³² In the end Chris knows better, but Ewan is happier in his own way, for, as Camus (1942: 168) says at the close of *Sisyphus*: "La lutte elle-même vers les sommets suffit à remplir un coeur d'homme. Il faut imaginer Sisyphe heureux."³³ a

NOTES

1. See Craig 1974 and Johnson 1976.

2. See Carter 1978.

3. See Young (1973) and next note. Douglas Gifford has qualified Young's argument properly: "This isn't to say that Young is wrong in arguing that Diffusionism permeates all [Mitchell's] work—it does—but where it is most successful, as in *Sunset Song* or *Spartacus*, it is a theory transmuted into a sub-stratum of haunting poetic idea, never, as in these propaganda-novels, clots of argument and lecture, or clumsy and improbable symbolic action" (Gifford 1983: 49).

4. The diffusionist theory of history assumed that the discovery of agriculture in Ancient Egypt, and the subsequent "diffusion" of the civilized life that rose from it, put an end to the primitive life of nomad hunters, a free life that was supposed to have ignored social inequity, depravity, and war. It was postulated by G. Elliott Smith, who, besides writing several books on the subject, edited the series "The Beginning of Things", which included H. J. Massingham's *The Golden Age: The Story of Human Nature* (1927), possibly the most popular book on the subject. The influence of Diffusionism is behind all Mitchell's novels, as a utopian counterpoint to their historical subjects, and the expression of the author's ironic resentment against modern life.

5. Mitchell's main intellectual contribution to the Scottish Literary Renaissance is in *Scottish Scene* (Gibbon and MacDiarmid 1934), a book of essays and short literary pieces he produced jointly with the leader of the movement, the nationalist poet Christopher Murray Grieve ("Hugh MacDiarmid"). The "romantic novels of claymores and stag-hunting" are mainly Walter Scott's romances and novels, which the modern Scottish writers regarded as a distorting view of their modern nation, while the "bonnie brier bush" is a reference to Reverend Ian Maclaren's *Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush* (1894), a famous example of the sentimental novel of the "Kailyard", against which Mitchell's generation reacted most strongly. *A Scots Quair* includes two similar allusions to the "brier bush" (Gibbon 1946: 31, 73).

6. For example, the need for a saving belief in the confounded modern world is in all his novels from his first, *Stained Radiance* (1930); visions of the Golden Age and escapes to it appear in his science-fiction works *Three Go Back* (1932) and *Gay Hunter* (1934); the search for the initial moment in which Western Civilization went wrong is in *The Lost Trumpet* (1932); the sense of adventure in his non-fiction *Hanno: or the Future of Exploration* (1928) and *Niger: the Life of Mungo Park* (1934) (the only one among these works that he published as Lewis Grassie Gibbon), and his own interest in the Maya in *The Conquest of the Maya* (1934).

7. The poem has been edited by Malcolm (1984: 187-8).

8. Spartacus and Kleon thus stand for the contraposition between the realist and idealist interpretations of myth, a distinction which can be seen to have originated with Giambattista Vico (1668-1744) and which C. Nash finds relevant to Mitchell's literary context: "Man must,

Vico says, 'descend' into the 'vast imagination' of his own beginnings, and myth is a principal medium for the expression of the primeval and universal in human experience, and thereby for the direction of human consciousness. Myth is a story, not a statement. It seems false only when we try to extend it as an idea into other realms. Myth and idea are two distinct attitudes of human consciousness towards truth. Mythology is the seed-bed of the idea —but as the idea emerges, myth disintegrates." (Nash 1980: 166). Kleon tries to turn the idealist myth of Spartacus into an idea, or realist myth, by putting it to direct political purposes.

9. Campbell 1988: 234.

10. William K. Malcolm actually relates the contrast between Kleon and Spartacus to that between the impulse of Absurd and of Wrath in Camus's philosophy (1984: 126). In my opinion Wrath is also a feature of Kleon, while Spartacus's deeply symbolic entity suggests an ideal rather than a character with his own impulses.

11. There are two notable Spanish studies of the relationship of language, culture and politics in Lewis Grassic Gibbon's work, by Fernando García García and Ramón López Ortega.

12. Burton 1984: 38.

13. Wagner 1955: 41.

14. Isobel Murray and Bob Tait put it very explicitly: "We would like to see much less attention paid to Diffusionism and, much more importantly, to the 'symbolic' or 'allegorical' meaning of the *Quair*. For convenience, we can point to the two appendices to J T Low's edition of *Sunset Song* (Longman, 1971, pp 293-6), where these ideas are summarised" (Murray and Tait 1984: 11). Their reference to the appendices of Low's edition is useful as far as Diffusionism is concerned, and their own study of the *Quair* is a positive contribution to the study of the "non-symbolic", human side of Gibbon's work, particularly with regard to its heroine.

15. Mitchell's treatment of the Covenanters as the Scottish archetype of modern revolutionaries coincides with current Marxist interpretations of seventeenth-century British history. Thus Christopher Hill deals in a similar way with the proletarian mass that filled the Puritan party in the English Revolution. See Kaye (1984). The fact that the Covenanters were fighting for their Scottish religion gives them an added nationalist dimension.

16. In *Sunset Song* Tony the Daftie is endowed with a role not unlike that of Tom the Fool in Shakespeare's *King Lear*: his apparent madness shows greater common sense than the tragic heroes of the novel. Thus when Chae is on leave just before joining the Great War, which he wrongly believes to be a fight for Socialism,

... Tony looked up and aside, *Ah, Chae, so the mills of God still grind?*

And Chae went on, and he thought of that, a real daft-like speak he thought it at first, but further up the brae ... , he scratched his head, was the thing so daft? He stopped and looked back, and there, far below, was the Tony childe, standing, glued to the ground. And Chae shivered in a way, and went on. (Gibbon 1946: 156)

The scene suggests the English proverb "God's mill grinds slow but sure", which the author seems to use ironically to suggest the destructiveness of History, and the no less ironical fact that, of all men in Kinraddie, it is the "daftie" that keeps his feet planted firmly on the ground during the War.

17. James Ramsay MacDonald (1866-1937) represented much of what the British left associated with the failure of Labour politics and their estrangement from the working-class values, particularly in Scotland, his native country. He had been the great hope of the socialist movement when he became the first Labour Prime Minister in January 1924, though the Conservative Party headed by Stanley Baldwin regained office less than a year later. His 1929 ministry was scarcely more successful in coping with the growing economic crisis and political discontent. His definite affronts were a cut in unemployment benefit and his formation of the National Government in coalition with Baldwin and a Conservative majority in 1931. *A Scots Quair* contains many direct references to his career, and his "treason" against socialist ideals is most dramatically satirized through the fictional Jock Cronin, who moved into London to become a professional Labour politician while his elderly father starved at home. Mitchell's essay "Representative Scots (I). The Wrecker Ramsay MacDonald" strikes a catastrophic note similar to that of the trilogy: "The Labour Movement may win again to shadowy triumphs, but the spirit, the faith and hope have gone from it... New armies are rising, brutal and quick, determined, desperate, mutually destructive, communist and fascist. Mr. Ramsay MacDonald has completed to perfection the task set him by the play of historic movements and blind economic forces" (Gibbon and Mitchell 1934: 107-8). Like many of his angry young contemporaries, Mitchell did not understand the National Government as a political measure to help prevent that same catastrophe.

18. The simile of the surgeon's knife is also used in *Thirteenth Disciple* (Mitchell 1931: 84), and it is commonplace in the 1930s leftist literature: see Cunningham 1988: 93-7.

19. George Steiner, "Epilogue" from *The Death of Tragedy* (1961) (in Steiner 1984: 164).

20. John MacLean (1899-1923) was the legendary hero and martyr of the Red Clydeside, during which workers and trade-unionists took the Town Hall of Glasgow, established a Soviet, and attempted a Communist Revolution. See Raszkowski (1979: 9-12). The most decisive incident leading to Ewan's conversion to Communism in *Grey Granite*, a violent confrontation between mounted policemen and demonstrators against the Meanst Test, is based on the so-called "battle of George Square", in which the Red Clydesiders also wielded bottles against the police. The scene in which the Communist Ewan, explicitly compared to an *Ecce Homo* after being beaten up by the police, scarcely able to stand on his feet, yet obstinately heading a demonstration (Gibbon 1946: 457), clearly recalls the historical figure of MacLean, who died young after repeated imprisonment. The figure of Jim Trease in the novel, the Trade Union leader who becomes Ewan's Communist mentor, might suggest William Gallacher, the true political brain behind the Red Clydeside, who in 1935 would be elected to Parliament for the Communist Party. Hugh MacDiarmid, who met Maclean personally and became one of his myth-makers, praised James Leslie Mitchell as "a Scottish Communist-Nationalist à la John MacLean" (MacDiarmid 1946: 121-30, 41).

21. Johnson, op. cit., p. 51.

22. Burton, op. cit., p. 45.

23. Two very interesting studies may be consulted with regard to the dissociation of the two main characters at the end of *A Scots Quair*: Wilson (1980) and Norquay (1984).

24. See Campbell 1974.

25. See Fromm 1984. First published in 1942, Fromm's analysis of the psychological mechanisms that led many Europeans of Mitchell's time away from freedom, undermining their own individuality, might provide another way of accounting for what happens to Ewan.

26. See Toynbee 1987: 429-532. First published in 1946, *A Study of History* is also close to the historical feelings of Mitchell's period. I think it would not be too far-fetched to compare Chris and Ewan's final reactions to those of archaism and futurism, respectively, which are violent escapes from reality. Chris archaism is unusual in that she accepts the fact of change, but typical enough in her wish to regress to what she regards as the natural state of Man in the Golden Age.

27. Nietzsche's Zarathustra advises men to be truthful to the Earth above all things, and never to believe those who speak of ultra-terrestrial hopes: "Ich beschwöre euch, meine Brüder, bleibt der Erde treu und glaubt denen nicht, welche euch von überirdischen Hoffnungen reden!" (Nietzsche 1985: 6). Mitchell echoed the famous Nietzschean dictum "Gott starb" in one of his few poems: "... the World is better / Since God has died" (ed. Malcolm 1984: 190-1). Even more remarkable is the similarity between *Sunset Song* and the German novel *Jorn Uhrl* (1905) by Gustav Frenssen: see Young, op.cit., pp. 146 ff. Mitchell did not acknowledge a particular interest in German culture, but his representation of the Scottish peasantry often coincides with it.

28. Graves 1960: 1.218.

29. See the popular contemporary book by George Dangerfield, *The Strange Death of Liberal England* (London, 1935; rpt. Paladin-Grafton Books, 1988).

30. See Fukuyama (1994), and Valdés Miyares (1991). In this study I have analysed the Civil War as a turning point in the view of history, particularly for those British writers who had held a Marxist view of history during the earlier 1930s, whose disillusionment with it anticipated that of many other Europeans in the following decades.

31. Mitchell's view of Scottish Nationalism is expounded in his essay "Glasgow" (Grassic Gibbon and MacDiarmid 1934: 136-7) and in a letter of 1934 to the Neil M. Gunn (Malcolm 1984: 7). In *A Scots Quair* (1946: 408) Chris puts it more plainly: "Nationalism was just another plan of the Tories to do down the common folk."

32. I am referring purposefully to Raymond Williams's positive appraisal of *A Scots Quair* (1973: 268-70). Raymond Williams is one of the founders of the modern British school of Cultural Studies, and Grassic Gibbon's approach to historical change converges remarkably with one of its main focuses as defined by Fred Inglis: "Ideology-critique still constitutes one of

the main sources of energy for Cultural Studies." He then points out something that would help explain Mitchell's attitude to ideology, especially Communism: "the truth first discovered by Hegel that ideas about the world live always in conflict with one another and that, as Isaiah Berlin puts it, the very history of thought and culture is 'a changing pattern of great liberating ideas which inevitably turn into suffocating straightjackets, and so stimulate their own destruction by new, emancipating, and at the same time, enslaving conceptions'" (Inglis 1993: 21). For a further confirmation of Mitchell's coincidence with the mainstream of Cultural Studies, one may turn to Richard Hoggart (1957) and his approach to traditional working-class culture, particularly the role of popular songs in it.

33. "The very effort to reach the summit is enough to fill a man's heart. We should imagine Sisyphus happy."

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