THE GOSPEL AND SCOTTISH FICTION

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In Scotland the novel made its first appearance when society was predominantly Christian and continues to be a significant literary form in today's secular society. Such a lengthy historical period has produced many substantial works of fiction. In this short paper, I intend to outline, necessarily briefly, the changing impact of Christianity on Scottish fiction from Sir Walter Scott to the present. The paper will provide a range of observation rather than specialist analysis, though I hope to make a few critical points throughout.

Sir Walter Scott's *Old Mortality* (1816)

The nickname 'Old Mortality', which provides the title of Scott's novel of the vexed religious history of the seventeenth century, belonged to an historical figure who in a slightly later period visited Covenanting graves to ensure that tombstone inscriptions were kept legible. Thus it is Scott's contention in the novel that only one side of the historical argument was being remembered. In *Old Mortality* he sets himself the task of redressing the balance. Scott thought of his novel as a warning against religious bigotry and many contemporary literary critics accept it as an accurate account of the period:

> Generations of subsequent research have only confirmed the essential justice and fairness of Scott's picture of both sides.[1]

The novel's plot centres on Henry Morton who, grieved by Royalist excesses, joins the Covenanters. Morton's piety is not of the Covenanting variety but it is real and sincere. His belief that the Covenanters should be free from oppression is what determines him to identify with them. Thus we are faced with the familiar split in Scott's work, where he cannot support the Episcopal state, personified by Claverhouse, though his heart lies there, but must support the oppressed Covenanters, simply because they are oppressed. Oppression is a symptom of government which has become so bad that it is destroying those it is meant to serve. Morton may not participate in the ethos of the Covenanters but he does share with them a unity of purpose which cannot be easily ignored. Even here, however, identification cannot be total, precisely because Scott fears in the Covenanters that same impulse to destructive authoritarianism which he detects in the state.

Though Morton fights for the Covenanting cause, the Covenanters Scott depicts are viciously sectarian, foolish or entirely mad. After the

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1 David Daiches, 'Scott's Achievement as a Novelist', in *Modern Judgements: Walter Scott*, ed. D.D. Devlin (London, 1969), pp. 33-62, at 50.

Battle of Bothwell Bridge, the Covenanters in disarray turn on Morton with a hatred so extreme that they contemplate his murder. As it is Sunday, they decide not to kill him till after midnight. In an extended note, Scott reveals that the essence of this story came to him from a Galloway exciseman who found himself in precisely that disturbing situation. In other words, one of the main pieces of evidence adduced by the narrative to establish the terror of the Covenanters has no basis in Covenanting history. Of course it could be argued that that does not affect its importance if it is true to the sort of things the Covenanters did. However, it is significant that Scott does not have to rely on reports of criminal activities from Galloway excisemen to produce evidence of state-sanctioned torture – he merely uses eye-witness accounts.

The notes did not appear until the Magnum edition of 1830: thus this distinction between sources would not have been apparent contemporaneously. Notwithstanding, contemporary reaction to *Old Mortality* was swift, forthright and hostile. John Galt said Scott 'treated the defenders of the Presbyterian church with too much levity, and not according to my impressions derived from the history of that time'.[2] Galt went on to write *Ringan Gilhaize* (1823), a historical novel dealing with events between the Reformation and the Restoration, which outlines the Covenanting position more sympathetically. Similarly James Hogg wrote *The Brownie of Bodsbeck* (1818) to counter Scott's novel. Unsurprisingly Scott found Hogg's novel 'false and exaggerated', to which Hogg replied by questioning the veracity of *Old Mortality*:

> [T]here is not one single incident in the tale – not one – which I cannot prove from history to be literally and positively true. I was obliged sometimes to change the situations to make one part coalesce with another but in no one instance have I related a story of cruelty or a murder which is not literally true. An' that's a great deal mair than you can say for your tale o' Auld Mortality.[3]

Despite this contemporary antagonism, which shows clearly how strong feelings still ran about the religious conflicts of the seventeenth century, among twentieth-century writers, artists and literary critics Scott's interpretation has carried the day. Scott's depiction of the Covenanters as bigoted and uncultured has often been followed by later writers when they too wish to dismiss Covenanters, Calvinists or Christians.[4] A writer such as Lewis Grassic Gibbon, who knew the story

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2 John Galt, *The Life and Literary Miscellanies of John Galt*, 3 vols (Edinburgh, 1834), I, p. 254.

3 James Hogg, *Memoir of the Author's Life and Familiar Anecdotes of Sir Walter Scott*, ed. Douglas S. Mack (Edinburgh and London, 1972), p. 106.

4 Further discussion of these issues can be found in Beth Dickson, 'Sir Walter Scott and the Limits of Toleration', *Scottish Literary Journal* 18

of Dunnottar Castle and on that basis aligned the Covenanters with ordinary Scots of his own day who wrested better working conditions from what they perceived to be a socially unjust state, is the exception rather than the rule.

James Hogg's *The Private Memoirs and Confessions of a Justified Sinner* (1824)

This title takes its reference not from history but from theology, from the central Reformation doctrine of 'justification by faith'. It concerns a strangely tormented character, Robert Wringhim, who believes he is one of the elect, but who murders his brother and finally takes his own life. That this novel has a multiplicity of interpretations is a literary commonplace. For the purposes of this paper I wish to suggest that it may be read as a warning not against intolerance, as Scott intended *Old Mortality*, but against excessive rationalism.

The novel is written in three parts. The Editor's narrative is written by a member of the Edinburgh Enlightenment *literati* and purports to be the objective, rational account of Robert Wringhim and the strange events of his life. The Sinner's Confessions are Robert Wringhim's own subjective, irrational account of these same events. Robert, being an 'elect and justified person', believes that he cannot lose his Christian identity by any action however wicked. Strictly speaking, therefore, the novel is not so much about justification as its theological but heretical double – antinomianism. Finally there is a short final account by the Editor of the discovery of the Sinner's grave together with his Confessions.

During the Sinner's narrative it becomes apparent that Wringhim fears the devil may have an interest in his soul and may at times possess him. Actions which seem inexplicable in the Editor's narrative, when told from the Sinner's point of view may be understood either as madness or occult possession. Wringhim has a friend he calls Gil-martin, who has close similarities to the devil as he is described in the Bible and in the Scottish folk tradition in which Hogg was steeped. It is apparent that Wringhim is a deeply troubled individual and describes in himself what the reader may recognise as the symptoms of schizophrenia. Gil-martin, the name he gives to the voice he hears which tells him to commit murder, may be the evidence of a split personality.

> Hogg's novel has been constructed to show the limits of rational endeavour. Douglas Gifford has said: [T]he parts are designed so that they fit an overall pattern of rational / objective experience set against supernatural / subjective experience .... Part 3 is a weighing up of the

(1991), pp. 46-61.

two claims, with new evidence on both sides, which significantly comes to no final resolution of both or decision for either.[5]

Similarly it is Tom Crawford's judgement that 'Uncertainty, ambivalence and mystification prevail throughout Hogg's masterpiece.'[6] Most criticisms of the novel take the form of arguments which are almost legal in the tightness of their construction, using the tiniest details to build up a case for one interpretation which harmonises all the evidence. However, the text stymies every attempt to reduce it to intellectual order. No matter the density of the argument it is hard for any reader to pronounce on the most basic question one may ask of a plot: what happened?

The novel is an open narrative *par excellence* and its view of reason contrasts strongly with that found in theological works which were commonly known. The Shorter Catechism, for example, proceeds by question and answer. The answers are categorical and closed. Theological narratives have an air of finality, assurance and confidence in their theoretical position. But Hogg is never categorical about what can be known. He demonstrates this in his work by forcing the reader to experience the crippling of their own rational powers by a text which thwarts intellectual endeavour.

Hogg also uses the narrative to make the obvious point that excessive rationality may distract from a proper attention to behaviour. Robert Wringhim is a clear example of a man who speaks a Christian rhetoric but whose behaviour is the antithesis of the gospel. Less obviously, however, the novel may also warn against the common but miserable emotional reaction to the rationalism of Reformed Christianity – spiritually unhealthy habits of morbidity and introspection which lead to self-obsession and self-absorption – habits which disrupt, worry and unsettle the processes of grace and faith in the life of the believer.

Old Mortality and *Justified Sinner*, novels from the first quarter of the nineteenth century, clearly show how deeply Christianity informed the intellectual and imaginative processes of Scottish writers. The novels raise question about politics, statecraft, history, philosophy and religion which are all discussed with reference to Christianity. Such an intense intellectual atmosphere which makes serious demands on the will – for what is apprehended intellectually must be lived out practically – seems to have had more perilous implications for the emotions and the imagination. Those strongly human functions when proportionately neglected produce a strange, dark mental interior of fear and unhappiness. (Similar psychological reactions are linked with the Puritan inheritance in Nathaniel Hawthorne's New England fiction.) Hogg's novel was hardly

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5 Douglas Gifford, *James Hogg* (Edinburgh, 1976), p. 145.

6 Tom Crawford, 'James Hogg: The Play of Region and Nation', in *The History of Scottish Literature*, 4 vols (Aberdeen, 1987-8), III (1988), p. 100.

understood in its time. It was not until the early twentieth century when the processes of human psychology were more widely understood that this difficult novel received fresh attention. It may be read still as one of the great religious novels of all time, a *Pilgrim's Progress* in reverse, a terrifying study of human destruction.

George MacDonald's *Malcolm* (1875)

This title contains a common Scottish Christian name and as such is reminiscent of other MacDonald titles, such as *David Elginbrod* (1863) and *Alec Forbes of Howglen* (1865). These names suggest an Everyman figure. This Everyman's quest is not Calvinist in nature or origin but rather is in flight from Calvinism, reflecting MacDonald's rejection of Calvinism and his appropriation of a more liberal Christianity. MacDonald was educated at King's College, Aberdeen, and became a Congregationalist minister in 1850. In 1855 he resigned over his views on the fate of those who had never heard the gospel. He turned to journalism, lecturing and literature in order to make his living. He was deeply influenced by the ideas of F.D. Maurice on the links between art and religion.

MacDonald combined unusual powers of making imaginative worlds with perceptive psychological insight. Works such as *Phantastes: A Faery Romance for Men and Women* (1858) influenced C.S. Lewis, J.R.R. Tolkein and David Lindsay. In his fantasy work Christian doctrine is implicit in myth. In the short story 'The Golden Key', the children Mossy and Tangle embark on a journey which leads them to the end of the rainbow. There Mossy finds the keyhole which fits the golden key he found at the outset. Through the 'complex and puzzling symbolism' of forests, baths, wildernesses, fire, and old men who look like children, MacDonald is able to deal with ageing, purification, perseverance, the love of God and his overriding theme that death is the aim of all existence.[7] While a paraphrase of the symbolism is always useful, the power of MacDonald's writing inheres in his symbolism which communicates, in ways which anticipate the theories of Freud and Jung, with the imagination and the emotions at their most profound.

Not all MacDonald's writing is fantasy. Although there may be fantastic elements in novels there are also psychologically realistic elements. Attacks on Calvinism as a distortion of the gospel are common in his fiction or on any view of Christianity which stresses guilt, judgement and hell, as in this extract from *Malcolm* which is an account of a revival in a north-east fishing community. MacDonald is content with the revival as a natural, spontaneous expression of fishermen's spirituality but is against all attempts to organise revival. The preacher is

7 William Raeper, *George MacDonald* (Tring, 1988), p. 319.

a young student whom the privations of student life, particularly hunger, have made seriously ill. MacDonald criticises his sermon:

> Not one word was there in it, however, concerning God's love of fair dealing, either as betwixt himself and man, or as betwixt man and his fellow; the preacher's whole notion of justice was the punishment of sin; and that punishment was hell, and hell only; so that the whole sermon was about hell from beginning to end – hell appalling, lurid, hopeless.[8]

Like Scott's criticism of the Covenanters, MacDonald's criticism of Calvinism has not gone unchallenged. In his book *The Churches in English Fiction*, Andrew L. Drummond takes MacDonald to task, arguing that his Calvinist characters are oddities, never reasonable representatives of their beliefs.[9] This is exactly the same charge made against Scott. Drummond also accuses MacDonald of holding too optimistic a view of humanity, arguing that sin was much more serious than he supposed. These criticisms are similar to those made earlier by T.G. Selby in *The Theology of Modern Fiction*, who says of MacDonald's characters:

> [They] do wrong because they dislike the demand the law of right makes upon the forces of the moral life, and perhaps never take active delight in evil for its own sake and in those who work evil. Sin is inertia, passivity, unresisting supineness, and not positive malignancy which may be as aggressively purposeful as a career of righteousness. This one-sided philosophy of the will often underlies the delineation of some of the incidents of common life, and gives a touch of artificiality to the scenes.... Under no circumstances does evil enlist the unknown powers of the will.[10]

The contrast with Robert Wringhim could not be more striking. Changing interpretations of Christianity have in this case precise fictional parallels.

The Kailyard

This is the dismissive epithet coined by W.E. Henley and given to the great outpouring of popular Scottish fiction at the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth century. William Robertson Nicoll (1857-1923), a son of the manse from Aberdeenshire, became a journalist and the hugely influential editor of the *British Weekly* (founded in 1886). He cultivated a number of Scots – J.M. Barrie, S.R. Crockett, Ian MacLaren and Annie S. Swan – who could produce the blend of popular fiction and

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8 George MacDonald, *Malcolm*, new edition (London, 1875), p. 186.

9 Andrew L. Drummond, *The Churches in English Fiction: A Literary and Historical Study* (Leicester, 1950), ch.8.

10 Thomas G. Selby, *The Theology of Modern Fiction* (London, 1897), pp. 154-5.

religious sentiment which attracted such a large market. Nicoll's aim in producing the magazine was to civilise Non-conformists by introducing them to art and culture, of which they had been traditionally suspicious. These Kailyard writers share with George MacDonald a liberal theology and an idealised view of human nature.

Ian MacLaren's *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush* (1894), a series of sketches of life in a rural Scottish community, was one of the Kailyard's runaway successes, eventually selling over three quarters of a million copies. Its initial sequence concerns George Howe, lad o' pairts, who has had to return home from his brilliant College career because he is terminally ill. In conversation with his mother he recollects how frightened he was after a revival evangelist had preached on eternal punishment and the fate of all those who did not repent and believe and had vividly illustrated his theme by burning a piece of paper and drawing the obvious conclusions. George's view of God is based as much on experience as on Scripture and rejects as unworthy of God some ideas of judgement and eternal punishment. Discussing this with his mother later, George remembers how she had come into his room and what she had said to comfort him that evening:

> 'Am I a guid mother tae ye?' and when I could dae naethin' but hold, ye said, 'Be sure God maun be a hantle kinder.' The truth came to me as with a flicker, and I cuddled down into my bed, and fell asleep in His love as in my mother's arms.[11]

The nature of the Kailyard as a popular fictional phenomenon was not fully grasped at the time. Kailyard fiction provoked a howl of protest from more literary writers who anathematized it for being sentimental in characterisation (people were too good to be true), in plot (all was not well), in theme (all was not for the best) and in setting (this was not the best of all possible worlds).

George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901)

It was this novel which vented much of the very real anger the Kailyard aroused. It can be read as a black parody of the Kailyard, though finally it is much more than that as it moves readers back to some of the central historical concerns of the Scottish novel – identity, conflict and history – using supernatural motifs to produce an Ayrshire more reminiscent of Burns than the Kailyard. Like Kailyard fiction, however, the novel is set in a rural community but that place seems more like hell than heaven. Its inhabitants are malign rather than benign and are motivated by self-interest. Its civic, business and institutional leaders are bereft of moral value. The village has two ministers, neither of whom has any influence for good on their parish. Its 'lad o' pairts' becomes an alcoholic at

11 Ian MacLaren, *Beside the Bonnie Briar Bush* (London, 1894), p. 37.

University and returns not to die in his mother's garden but to kill his father in the kitchen.

The writers of the Scots Literary Renaissance in the 1920s and 1930s consolidated this position. They wanted to re-create Scotland, to free it from the stereotypical images of it which dominated Kailyard fiction. They wanted to strip away the sentimentality which seemed to surround its history and literature in relation to figures like Bonnie Prince Charlie and Robert Burns. They also wanted to put an end to what they saw as the deathly influence of religion on culture. Many blamed Calvinism for blighting Scottish culture. Edwin Muir, Hugh MacDiarmid, Neil Gunn, Naomi Mitchison, Fionn MacColla and a number of others all held that view with varying degrees of intensity. It is a view which is still common today. However, if we take the case of Edwin Muir as an example, the form of Christianity with which he was familiar as a child was nineteenth-century revivalism. The early twentieth-century demonisation of Calvinism, while it is a serious historical argument, may also be understood as a reaction against a form of Christianity which was almost synonymous with a late Victorian outlook. Thus when reaction set in against that culture, its religious component was rejected as well. This case however remains to be made. Someone who does seem to highlight the need to discriminate between Calvinism and Evangelicalism is Catherine Carswell, to whom we now turn.

Catherine Carswell's *Open the Door!* (1920)

The title of this novel contains a sense of anticipation, of new possibilities. It is an obscure biblical quotation taken from 2 Kings 9:3 in which Jehu is advised to 'Open the door and flee'. This modifies the original anticipatory thrust by highlighting the necessity of escape from a dangerous environment. By using a biblical quotation in this way, that is by using an obscure quotation to apply to a present personal condition, Carswell shows a familiarity with evangelical habits of mind, which are so saturated in Scripture that its words are often used to articulate personal, even mundane, occurrences. For Carswell to use Scripture in this way is deeply ironic, because she uses the text to criticise the outlook which could produce such allusions.

Catherine Carswell was born Catherine MacFarlane in 1879. Both her grandfathers were ministers who came out at the Disruption in 1843. Carswell did not profess Christianity in adulthood. Her son John Carswell has written of her:

> Though she was converted to socialism by reading Blatchford at the age of seventeen, and later espoused many left-wing causes, she could never quite abandon the idea that 'underneath were the everlasting arms' or bear the depreciation of private charity.[12]

12 John Carswell, 'Introduction', in *Open the Door!* (London, 1986), pp.

Carswell was brought up in a deeply evangelical family and knew from personal experience the genuinely attractive outworking of religious faith in the lives of her parents. Although intellectually she could not believe in Christianity, and although she found parts of her parents' evangelical lifestyle life-denying, she did not use ridicule or satire to caricature believing people with whom she disagreed.

Many scenes in her novels will strike a chord with evangelical readers. In *Open the Door!* she describes the children's embarrassment when their mother begins to evangelise on the train. She describes the austerity of the Free Church assembly in a way which is moving rather than rebarbative. In *The Camomile* (1922), one of the main characters is an aunt who attends the Keswick convention and who entertains many lady missionaries who come to Glasgow to give reports of their work.

However, *Open the Door!* is a *Bildungsroman* which follows the development of Joanna Bannerman; Carswell sees it as necessary for the development of her human potential that she leave this busy religious world. Although full of activity, Joanna finds Evangelicalism empty in two significant areas. It does not sympathise with her interest in art and music, finding in these a rather doubtful distraction from the spiritual life. The varieties of human relationships it offers do not provide her with the deep blend of emotional, intellectual and sexual satisfaction she seeks. Neither does her affair with Louis Pender, though it seems to at first. The novel presents this relationship as Joanna's true marriage, though she has been married once before. (Her first marriage was brief and ended with the accidental death of her husband.) She 'had come from marriage immune', says the narrator as Joanna prepares to receive Louis; the use of the colour white in this description emphasises ideas of virginity and bridal nights.[13] However, Louis is married and has no intention of allowing his affair with Joanna to alter his respectable public persona in any way. This dooms the relationship. Joanna is left distressed and alone. She reflects on her love for Louis that there was much to be said for it but for her 'it was not enough'. As she accepts that the affair is over she hears 'a new voice',

> but it was the oldest of all voices. For it was the voice before creation, secure, unearthly, frail as filigree yet faithful as a star.[14]

It is not without significance that into this aesthetic description of a beautiful but vague universal benevolence, Carswell inserts the moral quality whose absence in Louis so destroyed Joanna.

Towards the end of her life Carswell began collecting materials for a life of Calvin, in order to tease out, as she had done in her biography of Burns, the myth from the reality of this figure who had such an effect on

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vi-vii.

13 *Ibid.*, p. 248.

14 *Ibid.*, p. 360.

Scottish life. At the same time she kept an informal diary, published as *Lying Awake*, in which she writes of her own spiritual disappointments:

> For me as an individual the worst thing in this unhappy age in which I have grown old is that one was born into a faith which could not, without deceit or strain, be maintained.[15]

Open the Door! is an important novel because of its critique of late-nineteenth-century Evangelicalism, which shows how close the relationship was at that time between Evangelicalism and contemporary culture and how that closeness created conditions which proved restrictive to a growing generation. When Joanna rejected the parochial, formal, active and yet soulless Glasgow middle-class society she found herself in, she also rejected the form of Christianity which seemed inseparable from it.

Lewis Grassic Gibbon's *Cloud Howe* (1933)

This title has no Christian significance. It is part of Gibbon's habit of selecting an image or group of images which sum up his theme. In this work, cloud imagery is used to describe beliefs and ideologies, in particular the passing of Christianity as a shared outlook among Scots. The novel charts the beginnings of pluralism and eclecticism in Chris but in the male characters – Robert, and then in *Grey Granite*, Ewan – the rising power of Christian Socialism and Communism.

Robert Colquhoun has married Chris Guthrie, heroine of *Sunset Song*. The couple move to Segget, a small town, and Robert, the local minister, sets out to improve the conditions of the millworkers who live in the town's poorest area. Robert begins by believing that men are basically people of goodwill and once shown the way will walk in it. Gibbon finds this outlook naive. Robert tries to enlist the help of local shopkeepers and others with civic responsibility but is dismayed by their unrepentant self-interest. Geddes, the schoolmaster, says, 'leave the lot alone, if there's anything a hog hates it's cleaning its sty'.[16]

Robert is swayed by Socialist activists who argue that politics must become increasingly radical to change conditions for these workers. He is embittered by the collapse of the General Strike but instead of being radicalised, he retreats into mysticism. He has a vision of Christ which turns him in the direction of quietist reflection. However, in one last awful incident he goes to relieve the suffering of a poor family. The prevailing weather conditions take a toll on his health, which was broken by the exigencies of life in the trenches in the First World War. In the last stages of his final illness, he preaches his last sermon:

> So we see, it seems, in the darkened sun... the end of Mankind himself in the West, or the end of the strangest dream men have dreamt – of

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15 *Lying Awake* (London, 1952), p. 169.

16 Gibbon, *Cloud Howe*, in *A Scots Quair* (London, 1946), p. 270.

> both the God and the Man Who was Christ, Who gave to the world a hope that passes, and goeth about like the wind, and like it returns and follows, fulfilling nothing. There is no hope for the world at all... except it forget the dream of Christ... and turn and seek with unclouded eyes, not that sad vision that leaves hunger unfed, the wail of children in unending dark.... But a stark, sure creed that will cut like a knife.[17]

The sure stark creed which will cut like a knife is of course Communism, which Gibbon explores further in the last volume of the trilogy, *Grey Granite*.

MacDonald's inclusivist and universal gospel – and behind it the formative influence of F.D. Maurice's Christian Socialism – presents a different thought world from that of the earlier nineteenth-century novels, still clearly influenced by, though often critical of, Reformed Christianity. In *Open the Door!* and *Cloud Howe* Carswell and Gibbon operate within a framework in which Christianity is still a strongly informing factor. Amid the intellectual disbelief and emotional dissatisfaction there is still a memory of respect and admiration. However, from this period onwards, even the memory of a living Christianity is forgotten. The move towards a political solution rather than a religious one, which Gibbon outlined, became more attractive to writers. The gospel is marginalised and loses its cultural primacy as the prevailing world view. To illustrate this development I want to look at three contemporary works of Scottish fiction: *Lanark* (1981) by Alasdair Gray; *The Bus Conductor Hines* (1984) by James Kelman and *Strange Loyalties* (1991) by William McIlvanney.

Alasdair Gray's *Lanark* (1981)

No Christian significance in the title is stated or implied. It is a fantasy novel. The reader follows Duncan Thaw on an after-life journey which takes him to Unthank – a nightmarish version of a Glasgow-like place projected into the future. In Unthank, Thaw is at the mercy of a powerful and dangerous social organisation which he cannot control or influence. This world feeds on all that is admirable in humanity. Man 'is the pie that bakes and eats itself', says the novel, taking to extremes the cannibalistic metaphor present in the phrase 'consumer society'. These passages alternate with passages set in Glasgow in the very recent past. In them Duncan Thaw, as an adolescent, meets a minister who tells him 'nothing that almost every Scotsman did not take for granted from the time of John Knox till two or three generations back, when folk started believing the world could be improved'.[18] Thaw voices common twentieth-century difficulties with Christianity, asking why God does not intervene to prevent suffering and saying he could not believe in hell. To

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17 *Ibid.*, pp. 349-50.

18 Alasdair Gray, *Lanark* (Edinburgh, 1981), pp. 62, 184.

which the minister responds that once he is older he will not find it such a fanciful concept.

Strangely enough this is exactly what happens. Unthank is hell. But this world is not a vision of the future, it is our own world heightened and highlighted. In *Lanark* Alasdair Gray implies that our own world, our materialistic, individualistic society, is hell.

James Kelman's *The Bus Conductor Hines* (1984)

Kelman writes about inner-city life. He believes that there is no such thing as bad language, and that ordinary people and their language and culture have been excluded from literary discourse because of discrimination against their social class practised by a literary élite.[19]

The only remnants of Christianity in the world he describes are a few of the names of God repeatedly taken in vain. Through the unrelieved bleakness of his prose style, Kelman shows a narrow society restricted to the pub, the betting shop, the DSS office and sometimes a dreary workplace. The chief activities of this world are gambling, quarrelling, hanging about, joyless sex, getting drunk. The vision is of anomie, the hopelessness, misery and despair of the kind of life many people lead, of human beings deprived of choice, opportunity and change. It is a society of inhuman narrowness and restriction where poverty is the condition of existence and an unchangeable destiny.

William McIlvanney's *Strange Loyalties* (1991)

William McIlvanney writes, among other fiction, crime novels about a detective called Jack Laidlaw. McIlvanney has been influenced by existential writing and thinking, left-wing politics and American detective fiction, particularly the work of Raymond Chandler. In *Strange Loyalties* he probes Laidlaw's experience, moving through the political explanations of late twentieth-century life which characterize a novel such as *The Big Man* (1985), and deepening the existential analysis which surrounds Laidlaw, the hero of his detective stories. Reflecting on his work in *Strange Loyalties*, Laidlaw thinks:

> In just about every case I've investigated, I've wanted to implicate as many people as I could, including myself. My ideal dock would accommodate the population of the world. We would all give our evidence, tell our sad stories and then there would be a mass acquittal and we would all go away and try again.[20]

Strange Loyalties is a study of guilt. The plot centres on a car accident in which, although a man was killed, the occupants of the car covered up their involvement. The novel describes their differing reactions. One of

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19 Kirsty McNeill, 'Interview with James Kelman', in *Chapman* 57 (1989), pp. 1-9.

20 *Strange Loyalties* (London, 1991), p. 10.

the passengers of the car was Scott Laidlaw, the detective's brother, whose sudden death provokes Laidlaw's investigation. Reflecting on Scott's death Laidlaw concludes:

> [H]is last gift to me from the grave had perhaps been a more intense vision of the blackness in myself. It gave me a proper fear of who I was. In trying to penetrate the shadows in his life I had experienced more deeply the shadows in my own. I was his brother, all right. That beast he had fought, that ravens upon others, slept underneath my chair. I would have to try to learn to live with it as justly as I could. Beware thyself.[21]

In these passages, McIlvanney through his existential beliefs and his observation has formulated human guilt as something deeply personal, of greater enormity than any of the deeds it feels guilty about, as well as being a measure of human solidarity. The closeness of this formulation to the Calvinistic conception of total depravity is as striking as the fact that McIlvanney does not see the resemblance and is unaware that Laidlaw's image of all the world being called to court is reminiscent of Paul's language in Romans 3. While McIlvanney has given a searchingly honest, 'warts and all' portrayal of Jack Laidlaw, who sees human failings in others and in himself and who finds others and himself 'guilty', there is no evidence so far in McIlvanney's fiction of any redemptive mechanism, whereby mankind could extricate itself from its predicament, but only the resolute refusal to deny this knowledge but to live as uprightly as possible in the light of it.

Conclusion

In conclusion I offer a contrast and a comparison. The contrast could not be clearer between a novel such as *Old Mortality*, in which the gospel was so much part of everyday life that an entire society was in bitter disagreement about it, and *The Bus Conductor Hines*, where the name of Christ exists merely as a curse against the obstacles of life. The titles of the earlier novels show an easy familiarity with Christianity, yet by 1991 a well-educated author can come up with an image which happens to be significant for the New Testament and be unaware of the similarity. A working knowledge of Christianity has disappeared. That being said, it should not be overlooked that within the period of Christianity's common acceptance, there are different emphases. While the Reformed influence produced novels of a serious disposition, the liberal influence of the late nineteenth century produced a much more optimistic outlook as reflected in the fiction of George MacDonald and, in its popular manifestation, in the sentimentality of the Kailyard.

However, there is a comparison which, though not so obvious, is in some ways more striking. It concerns the resilience of a pessimistic view

21 *Ibid.*, p. 280.

of humanity in Scottish fiction. We are used to hearing Calvinists being condemned for their gloomy outlook on life, their insistence on hell, predestination and sin. What we are not so used to noticing is that the themes of hell, destiny, guilt, judgement and the overwhelming seriousness of life are the province of our contemporary and fashionable novelists, such as Gray, Kelman and McIlvanney. That a society which has foresworn its Calvinistic past because of its detrimental effects on human life should, when left to its own devices, come up with a secular version of it shorn of any conception of redemption or an afterlife seems perverse. It seems almost possible to argue the opposite of Edwin Muir's thesis, not that Calvinism produced gloom and pessimism but that it was because Scots found much to discuss about the darker side of human nature, that Calvinism appealed to them. Or it may be, as T.G. Selby has argued, that any author, Christian or otherwise, is valued because of the accuracy with which he or she depicts the human condition:

> It is something more than a complimentary tribute to the moral sense of the reader that truth, fidelity, disinterestedness, either by some innate property of the mind itself or by the providential forces which order the world, receive their due reward; whilst the latter end of treachery, corruption, and crime thrusts itself as irresistibly upon the apprehension of all the great masters of fiction as upon that of the psalmist when he 'went into the house of God'.[22]

Whether or not Scottish fiction bears out this opinion is arguable. What does seem to be apparent is that whether influenced by the theological opinions of the seventeenth century or by the crimes of the twentieth, Scottish writers have produced some of their greatest fiction by studying with remorseless honesty the frailty of humanity and the difficulties of this present life.

22 T.G. Selby, *The Theology of Modern Fiction* (London, 1897), pp. 6-7.