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The Journalism of Neil Munro : Fiction, Criticism and Cultural Comment

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M.Phil: Scottish Literature

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Abstract

In a period of over thirty years from the mid 1890s, Neil Munro occupied a unique position in Scotland's literary and social scenes. Although perhaps now best known as a novelist, short-story writer or essayist Munro was primarily a journalist, mainly with Glasgow's *Evening News* and later in life with the *Daily Record*, and in this role he cast a wide and critical eye over Scottish life and letters.

This research focuses primarily on Neil Munro's journalistic output in the (Glasgow) *Evening News* and seeks to determine his views on literature, his literary and artistic peers and contemporary and current affairs in two specific periods gathered from prime records (from 22nd August 1895 to 27th January 1898 and at the resumption of the columns after the Great War, 19th June 1919 to 28th June 1920) and from published compilations of articles gathered throughout his career until 1927. In compiling two weekly columns in the *Evening News*, *The Looker-On* on the Monday and *Views and Reviews* on the Thursday, Munro influenced the opinions and reading habits of a large section of the population of the west of Scotland. In *Views and Reviews* he set out his views on the meaning of art and literature, nationally and internationally; in *The Looker-On* Munro sketched the world around him, whether local or national or international, through his eclectic choice of topics and his personable and endearing style.

The thesis is structured in three main parts, each one dealing, in short, focussed episodes, on topics arising from the journalism. Part One deals mainly with material before the First World War; Part Two with issues which straddle the pre- and post-War periods; Part Three considers the episodic fiction found in *The Looker-On* columns. Rather than adopt a general, over-arching argument, this approach allows us to take shorter, sharper assessments of

Munro's views of particular aspects of the culture that was his context. These then gradually accumulate to allow us to draw general conclusions only after we have allowed each one its particular value and place.

This consideration of a range of subjects builds up a picture of a journalist with strong views on the state of literature, of Scotland, of all the arts. His opinions are founded on Victorian and Edwardian sensibilities, in the sense that he is open to the working of arts and science in society as a whole, and the romantic tradition, in that he engages emotionally as well as intellectually with his subjects, seeking passion in the work of others rather than intellectual rigour. Crucial to the structure of the thesis is the argument that by considering these two periods of his journalism, pre-War (1895 – 98) and post-War (1919 – 1927), two different aspects of Munro's character can be understood more profoundly. Pre-war, his journalism expresses his healthy curiosity in human nature, his comfort in tradition and the effect of scientific and social progress and a creeping globalism on the citizens of his adopted city. Post-war, acknowledging the changes caused by the Great War, he seems to become paralysed, trying to respond to new literary and social structures, rejecting the experimentalism of modernism and seeing no need or value in an organised "Scottish Renaissance". And yet, as the research for this thesis should make clear, the late nineteenth- and early twentieth-century sensibility that is evident in Munro's journalism does in fact carry him forward into the context of the modern world in his three series of episodic fiction, *Earchie* (1902-1926), *Para Handy* (1905-1924) and *Jimmy Swan* (1911-1917 and then 1923-1926).

In conclusion, I will suggest that the essential literary value and popularity of these stories lies in their emergence from the pre-War sensibility and their characters' humble sympathy for the pre-War world.

Note

Most of Munro's journalism quoted and discussed in this thesis was accessed in the Mitchell Library in Glasgow and read from microfilm copies of the original newspaper articles. Acknowledgements to the provenance of these articles are given in the text of the thesis with reference to the date of the articles quoted.

1. Introduction

The exigencies of life bound him to journalism, but in all he wrote there was a literary twang. And why for not, as some of his own characters might have said, for much of journalism is as good literature as the greater part of epoch-making novels.

Attributed to R.B. Cunninghame Graham¹

In a period of over thirty years from the mid-1890s, Neil Munro occupied a unique position in Scotland's literary and social scenes. Although perhaps now best known as a novelist, poet, short-story writer or essayist, Munro was primarily a journalist, mainly with Glasgow's *Evening News* and later in life with the *Daily Record*, and in this role he cast a wide and critical eye over Scottish life and letters.

In compiling two weekly columns in the *Evening News*, *The Looker-On* on the Monday and *Views and Reviews* on the Thursday, Munro influenced the opinions and reading habits of a large section of the population of the west of Scotland. In *Views and Reviews* he set out his views on the meaning of art and literature, nationally and internationally, reviewed and criticised the books and journals of the day and took to task those writers who failed to meet his high standards. He championed the books of those he deemed worthy (such as Joseph Conrad), challenged the Kailyard writers and their parochial version of his homeland (such as Ian Maclaren and S.R. Crockett) and was suspicious of those he suspected of being false or disingenuous (Fiona Macleod and C.M. Grieve). In *The Looker-On* Munro sketched the world around him, whether local or national or international, through his eclectic choice of topics and his personable and endearing style. The column engaged with its subject matter in a variety of ways, sometimes brutally frank and direct, sometimes obtuse and

¹ Osborne and Armstrong (eds), *That Vital Spark* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2002), p.2

charming; sometimes Munro conveyed his own views unequivocally, sometimes he used a cast of characters, in a particular situation or location, to act out a range of opinions. He was also anonymous in his newspaper contributions, his regular columns being unattributed. As discussed, this facet does cause some problems in asserting Munro's views on specific subjects and in confrontations. Also, as his episodic work is published he adopts his Hugh Foulis identity to separate this work from his "serious" writing.

The Looker-On column was also the source of Munro's episodic fictions: *Para Handy*, *Ermie* and *Jimmy Swan*. Munro's discursive style dominated the format of the stories, although each had a particular geographical and social focus: *Ermie* was based in Glasgow and concentrated on tenement life and city attractions, *Jimmy Swan* covered business in the city of Glasgow and its rural environs, *The Vital Spark* travelled the Clyde, from Glasgow to Loch Fyne and the Inner Hebrides, conveying a Highland and Gaelic view of activities and social situations. The regular cast of characters in each story-set interacted within their setting to comment on the issues and problems of the day, usually inconclusively. These stories were written and published throughout Munro's career and enjoyed popularity over a period of thirty years, before and after the Great War.

Beth Dickson included Munro in a group of novelists of his time (with George Douglas Brown, J. McDougall Hay and J.M. Barrie) who failed to acknowledge that they lived in an industrial country at all but preferred to dwell on a view of Scotland which was nostalgic, quaint and old-fashioned, in speech, customs and subject matter.² Munro's romantic novels can be said to follow on, in terms of style and subject matter, from Scott and Stevenson and, as a literary critic, he was a great admirer of their work, believing that they had set the

² Beth Dickson, 'Foundations of the Modern Scottish Novel', Cairns Craig (ed), *The History of Scottish Literature* Vol.4, (Aberdeen: AUP, 1987), p.49

standard for Scottish literature. However, in the prelude to modernism, Munro's journalism mainly dealt with contemporary, literary and urban issues. He was party to the demise of catholicity in literature, the move from the general reader with an open mind and broad taste to the speciality, and the critical separation of financial success and popularity from literary worth. He wrote at a time when science and technology were making an impact on production and industry and while he heralded the new inventions of Marconi and Baird he railed against the social and health consequences of industrialisation upon the city of Glasgow, as personalised in his attacks on Lord Overtoun and Charles Tennant, as we shall see in chapters 4 and 15. The difference between his novelistic and journalistic output is marked, and it should be emphasised that Munro was entirely at home, and familiar with, the urban setting he lived and worked in, as evidenced by the contemporary, urban topics tackled in the *Looker-On* column. His daily journalism assumes an educated, sophisticated, urban readership, which is interested and engaged in current social and literary developments. This city-centred quality perhaps brings him closer to modernity than previously allowed, as will be discussed in the thesis.

This research focuses primarily on Neil Munro's journalistic output in the (Glasgow) *Evening News* and seeks to determine his views on literature, his literary and artistic peers and contemporary and current affairs. It would be impossible to review his total output from 1895 till 1927 thoroughly in the space of this thesis, examining and analysing two articles per week from microfilm. Therefore, primary data from the *Evening News*, accessed at Glasgow's Mitchell Library, has been considered in two periods: from the start of Munro's involvement with *Views and Reviews*, 22nd August 1895 to 27th January 1898 and at the resumption of the columns after the Great War, 19th June 1919 to 28th June 1920. In

addition, material previously collected in volumes from the columns was considered, particularly from *The Brave Days* and *The Looker On*, first collected and published by George Blake in book form in 1931 and 1933 respectively.

As such, this research is not intended to be a comprehensive and complete overview of Munro's journalism. It surveys his work in the two periods, compiles patterns and topics and examines and analyses Munro's views and attitudes on an eclectic choice of subjects within the specific periods and attempts to build up an understanding of his techniques and approaches. The structure of the research, and the patterning of topics, results in the short and episodic chapters. Moreover, Munro's reactions to or appraisals of events, or criticism of a novel, may be random, triggered by an unrelated matter, a re-publication or his recollection of a meeting, a lunch, a concert, a friendship. Therefore this survey of his journalism has paid close attention to the apparently arbitrary nature of his columns and begins with first-hand archival readings of the source documents. Throughout the examined periods I have paid close and strict attention to the discrete areas of his writing without trying to impose a sense of uniformity, or a common vision, upon them. Nevertheless, from this research an assessment of Munro's achievement arises and is demonstrated rather differently from that found on an account of his novels

This consideration of a range of subjects builds up a picture of a journalist with strong views on the state of literature, of Scotland, of all the arts. His opinions are founded on Victorian and Edwardian sensibilities, in the sense that he is open to the working of the arts and science in society as a whole, and the romantic tradition, in that he engages emotionally as well as intellectually with his subjects, seeking passion in the work of others rather than intellectual rigour. The fundamental basis of Munro's work is a humanist, generalist

sensibility representing catholicity in taste and an optimistic faith in the curiosity and sympathy of his readers. He addresses his readers respectfully and affectionately. They are the general public, the “common reader”, reasonably well-read, independently-minded, intelligent people, the Glasgow version of the man on the Clapham omnibus, not a target audience or specialist literary readership. Archibald Charteris, in the introduction to the book *Glasgow in 1901*, identified this reader as “The Cityman”:

The salt of the middle class with all its virtues and limitations [...] active, intelligent, shrewd and practical.³

Crucial to the structure of the thesis is the argument that by considering these two periods of his journalism, pre-War (1895 – 98) and post-War (1919 – 1927), two different aspects of Munro’s character can be understood more profoundly. Pre-war, his journalism expresses his natural curiosity in human nature, his comfort in tradition and the effect of scientific and social progress and a creeping globalism on the citizens of his adopted city. Post-war, acknowledging the changes caused by the Great War, he seems to become paralysed, trying to respond to new literary and social structures, rejecting the experimentalism of modernism and seeing no need or value in an organised “Scottish Renaissance”.

By reading Munro’s journalism in these two periods, we might understand something essential about his relationship to late nineteenth-century Scottish and international culture, on the one hand, and the inception of Modernism in Scotland and Europe, on the other. As his novel writing career faltered after the Great War his journalistic work and the resulting episodic fiction became the sustaining and popular product of his writing. His daily journalism, albeit anonymous, entertained thousands of readers; his episodic fiction, under a nom-de-plume, endures well to the present.

³ James Hamilton Muir, *Glasgow in 1901* (Oxford: White Cockade, 2001), p.xxi

As Neil Munro “disappeared” from the reader’s view his literary characters flourished in the popular press. The short stories seem removed from literary modernism yet it could be argued that Munro shared a set of basic ideals and beliefs with his contemporaries. In *The Waste Land*, T.S. Eliot’s identification of the core values of *Data*, *Dayadhvam* and *Damyata*⁴ (giving, sympathy and self-control) are clearly synonymous with Munro’s approach to journalism and fiction. The uncertain affirmations which lead to the conclusion of this paradigm of the Modernist poem are essentially the humanist, conservative values Munro shared implicitly. However, Munro’s journalistic approach had no affinity with the formal experimentation of Modernism, of which *The Waste Land* and *Ulysses* remain paradigmatic. He continued to speak to the general public directly and clearly. His fictional characters occupied the world of work known to his readers, shaded with nostalgic tones of a disappearing world. Nurtured in journalism the vital aspects of Munro’s episodic fiction endure; the strength of characters in *Para Handy*, the social commentary of *Earchie* and the pathos of *Jimmy Swan*.

In their urban, limited, mercantile aspects the characters who endure in these sets of short stories are close to the “little people” whose lives we learn to value more in the literature of Modernism: *The Good Soldier Schweik* or Joyce’s Bloom. *Para Handy*, *Earchie* and *Jimmy Swan* are close cousins of these people, but they also carry the pathos of emerging from a more comprehensively coherent world that has been broken and lost. And just as Munro’s columns and essays on a wide and eclectic range of topics suggest the variety and optimism of the late-nineteenth century world, the short story form of the three series of episodic fiction represents the experiences of the characters more appropriately than any full-sized novels could have done. None of the characters occupy a “grand narrative” but each has an

⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Collected Poems 1909-1962* (London: Faber and Faber, 1974), p.68

elaborate and convincing history and background, unique verbal and behavioural tics and a sense of close community that engages immediately and easily with both the newspaper and anthology reader.

2. Audience and Authenticity

As a writer of novels, poetry and daily journalism, Neil Munro strived to give his reading audience what he thought they wanted while promoting the notion of an ideal and authentic literature which reached a certain literary standard and, in a national context, was consistent with his sense of history and romance and his view of modern day Scotland.

In a *Views and Reviews* column on 21st October 1897, Munro writes the following:

My dear “Constant Reader”, your nom-de-plume, by the way, seems familiar. I am touched by the innocent confidence which impresses you with the idea that I am qualified to prescribe the course of reading for a young man.

There is none. At all events, if there is a best course it is difficult in every individual case and the individual himself alone can find out which is the best if he lives long enough to try them all [...] Perhaps the best advice you could get is to read everything.

His use of the term “Constant Reader” is an echo of Dr Johnson’s “Common Reader” (1751) and predates Leavis’s notion of the “Suitable Reader” (1932). It suggests that Munro had the view that he was addressing a distinct and identifiable readership with his journalism with whom he shared a “social tone” and some understanding of their requirements. He himself had some notion of their characteristics and in the same article he labels, in jest, the various groupings: omnivorous reader, suburban reader and literary dram-drinker. He seems to have seen himself, at least in his critic’s role, as a comforting guide and servant, recommending good authors and worthy works which might suit the needs of his readers, always downplaying his own abilities and talents. Beata Kohlbek states that, rather than

concentrating on the usual menu of dry, factual accounts of political, commercial and legal matters:

what Munro always wanted to achieve was to entertain, to write with humour and satire, to be poetic when the theme allowed it and to offer a wide range of articles in which every reader could find something.⁵

However, as noted in Chapter 8, he was also a champion of, what we might term nowadays, the notion of high culture, dismissing the literary importance of financially successful writers of the period such as Mrs Henry Wood, Marie Corelli and Hall Caine. On 29th April 1920, he writes:

Does the general reader want to read the good men? Does he really want his intellect as well as his senses titillated?

The encouragement of discrimination in reading has to begin with the teaching of the alphabet. The battle will be won in the schoolroom – and lost, by the way, on the playing fields of Eton.

And:

Oh for a class of boys and girls from 10 to 15 years of age. Give me an hour a day with them, 4 days a week, and a free hand – and if I do not, through literary means, produce sane, intelligent, keen and constructive citizens, you may cut off my head.

This view was reflected in Q.D. Leavis's comments on the general public's lack of engagement with modern literature in 1968:

the general public has now not even a glimpse of the living interests of modern literature, is ignorant of its growth and so prevented from developing with it, and that the critical minority to whose sole charge modern literature has now fallen is isolated, disowned by the general public and threatened with extinction.⁶

With reference to his own work, Munro was caught up in what Gavin Wallace called a "dreadful dichotomy, the self-conscious polarity between the values of high and popular

⁵ Renton and Osborne (eds), *Exploring New Roads* (Colonsay: House of Lochar, 2003), p.217

⁶ Q.D. Leavis, *Fiction and the Reading Public* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1968), p.35

culture”.⁷ As *Neil Munro* he was the well-respected author of romantic novels, most successfully with *John Splendid* (1898), *Doom Castle* (1901) and *The New Road* (1914). In writing his *Views and Reviews* and *The Looker-On* columns he was strictly anonymous in print; the columns had no by-line. When his stories were collected by Blackwood he deliberately took on a nom de plume (*Hugh Foulis*) to separate these works from his other works. In his letters to Munro, proposing the collection of stories, William Blackwood makes a distinction in the tone, the style and the content of the stories compared to the novels. In his letter to Munro of 30th January 1899, he describes the stories as “burlesque”; on 2nd November 1903 Blackwood ventures that the *Earchie* sketches “might clash with your more dignified works of fiction”.⁸ On 9th November 1903 Munro replies to William Blackwood:

but as to *Earchie*, I have every reason to believe a collection of the philosophical utterances of that gentleman would be secure of a certain degree of popularity; I should not care to publish them with my name however.⁹

Munro must have realised that in writing for different audiences he needed to present himself to each as a different persona, to try to define the ownership, the authorship, associated with “Munro” or “Foulis”. But the statement also displays Munro’s endorsement of an idea of literary refinement, of dignified superiority, as noted in Chapter 9. When Munro notes the lack of reverence in Kipling he is also acknowledging that he himself reveres and respects the superior authority of the “serious novelist”. Paradoxically, while he craved “high” literary and artistic recognition he attained lasting respect and acclaim through his irreverent stories. In a bitter comment, according to Norman Bruce, Munro

⁷ “Compton Mackenzie and the Scottish Popular Novel” by Gavin Wallace in *The History of Scottish Literature*, Vol.4, p.244

⁸ Hermann Völkel, *Das literarische Werk Neil Munros* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994), p.202 & p.221

⁹ *Das Literarische Werk Neil Munro*, p.221

regarded the popular stories of *Para Handy* in terms of “blackening his face and singing in the street”.¹⁰ The “dreadful dichotomy” was that *Erchie*, *Jimmy Swan* and *Para Handy*, all attributed to the Hugh Foulis “brand”, all made up of seemingly stereotypical Scottish comic figures and situations with little literary pretensions, were at least as successful as his serious works. Osborne and Armstrong present a more unifying stance, maintaining that,

however much we try to put Munro’s writing into categories (a process which he started with the “Hugh Foulis” persona) it was all written by one man, and a man who did not forget his novelist’s art when he entered the Evening News office, or let his journalistic training and instincts atrophy when engaged in more “literary” ventures.¹¹

As a journalist, under his mantle of anonymity, Munro seemed able to undertake his criticism duties with zeal and enthusiasm. Although it was well known that he was the writer “behind” *Views and Reviews* and *The Looker-On* he was never named, perhaps granting him the confidence and security to be contrary, expound adverse views and be mischievous. Perhaps he built this commentating role into his episodic fiction, becoming the nameless narrator that engaged *Erchie*, *Para Handy* and *Jimmy Swan* in conversation, elicited views and comments, made his own observations on what is happening around him. Furthermore, Munro’s journalistic persona remained constant across the series, guarding the characters while all the important variables (the settings, language and cast) changed around him.

Neil Munro seems to have retained a sense of authenticity whatever persona was to the fore. His writing displayed his personal, social and artistic values and beliefs. These attributes are easy to identify in his literary criticism; he is passionate about literature, eager

¹⁰ Lesley Lendrum, *Neil Munro – The Biography* (Colonsay: House of Lochar, 2004) p.157

¹¹ Osborne and Armstrong (eds), *That Vital Spark* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2002), p.137

to praise and support new writers, quick to condemn inferior work and protective of traditional and classical forms under threat from modernity. Sometimes his passion overrules his logic; he regrets his haste, reconsiders and changes his mind, tempering previous over-reactions. He was a traditionalist; in all his works he takes a lisible rather than scriptable approach, as defined by Roland Barthes, presenting a recognisable world, relying on established literary conventions rather than a more opaque, modernist intervention.¹²

I believe that Neil Munro managed to engage with this variety of audiences and retain his authenticity, but again he presents himself in his writing in a variety of ways. He is a Gael and a Highlander, by birth, by native tongue, and sees himself as a writer of Romantic novels, following Scott and Stevenson. He fully utilised his heritage and history in his novels (but only occasionally in his journalism and short fiction), although he did not write in Gaelic, a feature highlighted by MacDiarmid as a fault in 1920. In his journalism he wrote in English, obviously a pre-requisite for a Glasgow and West of Scotland based paper, and observed and represented the views, strengths and faults of Glaswegians. However, in this his “accent” is variable, moving from the proper English tones of his “Cast” members to the “Gleska” vocabulary of Erchie and his cronies.

Munro was able to present his three series of episodic fictions with three different vocabularies and language. The vast majority of characters in *Erchie* speak a Glaswegian version of Scots. In the *Para Handy* stories, the crew speak a more Highland version of Scots, with attempts made, via some changes in spelling, to express an underlying Gaelic influence and background. *Jimmy Swan* speaks in a more refined voice but slips into local

¹² J.A. Cuddon, *Literary Terms and Literary Theory* (London: Penguin, 1998), p.463

parlance when required, to mirror his customers, whether urban or rural. As discussed in Chapter 17, the exception in all the series is the voice of the narrator, who assumes a proper and appropriate English vocabulary.

Therefore Munro managed to use a number of authentic voices, all Scots-based and recognisable but, as mentioned before, tailored for his audience. As his main medium was daily journalism he would be driven by commercial as well as literary pressures and therefore needed to engage with the widest readership. His literary and arts criticism had to be appropriately framed in order to gain the most positive reception, from readers and management, to continue his mainly freelance position with the paper. Despite this he still managed to inject a self-mocking view of his own profession into his journalism. On the 28th January 1897, when considering a *Blackwood's* review of Professor Saintsbury's book, *Twenty Years of Reviewing*¹³, he gives his own tongue-in-cheek opinions of why book reviews are really written and what a critic really is:

1. To advance good literature
2. To make news for newspapers' readers
3. To please the publishers who advertise (always in the morning papers)
4. To gratify the reviewer.

[...] and the last kind of review is usually the only one worth reading.

Everybody knows what a reviewer is – a “stickit” author who revenges himself upon the world at large, and the successful in literature in particular, by writing the bitterest of criticism.

¹³ There is no trace of a book of this name written by Professor Saintsbury, perhaps a member of staff at the University of Edinburgh at this time, nor by Professor George Sainsbury, a notable critic of the time.

There is no doubt that Munro was keenly aware of his image, the importance of his connections with arts and literary circles and his position of influence in Glasgow and the west of Scotland, carefully maintained for approximately thirty years in his position in the *Evening News*. He was extremely able, more in his younger years, to juggle the demands of novel writing, journalism and newspaper management, successfully marketing his work with *Blackwood*. He represented the stable “romantic” tradition of literature and struggled to come to terms with the chaotic aftershock of the Great War and the literary demands of the Scottish Renaissance and international literary modernity. Above all, he demonstrated his authenticity in his self-deprecating humour and in his heart-felt passion for writing.

On 21st August 1919, in a *Views and Reviews* column, he sums up his position on literature, without reference to technique, style or authorship:

Can we not admit that, to many of us, literature is a sacred, simple thing, like religion and the love of women? All big things are simple and we must conserve the simplicity of literature at all costs.

Neil Munro, above all else, maintained a dignified stance in all his work. He was a respectable, professional journalist with a sacred mission to engage with, and entertain, his readers. This was a strength but also a limitation.

3. Impressionism

Neil Munro completed his two weekly columns for the *Evening News* for most of his working life, paradoxically as he gave up daily journalism to write “full time”, producing over 2,000 pieces over a period of thirty-two years. He succeeded J.N. Dunn in the writing of the arts and literary critic column *Views and Reviews* in 1895.¹⁴ In 1897 he started the more general, topical column, *The Looker-On*.

By the mid-1890s there had been an explosion in the demand for books, newspapers and journals through the expansion of print culture and the spread of compulsory education with a resultant rise in literacy levels.¹⁵ The Public Libraries Act, although passed in 1853 in Scotland, was now being enacted and the free provision of books by municipal public libraries was supplemented by a network of subscription libraries (such as Mudie’s, WH Smith, the Times Book Club and Boots).¹⁶

The *Evening News* was one of large number of newspapers in Glasgow at the turn of the century. In Munro’s time there were over 20 newspapers available, and details are noted in the table below.¹⁷ The *Evening News* had a long and varied history. It was established as the *Glasgow Evening Post* in 1866 and changed its identity on a regular basis until 1888 when it became the *Glasgow Evening News*. In 1905 it was renamed as the *Glasgow News*. It became the *Evening News* until its demise in 1957.¹⁸ Full details of this history are contained in Appendix 1.

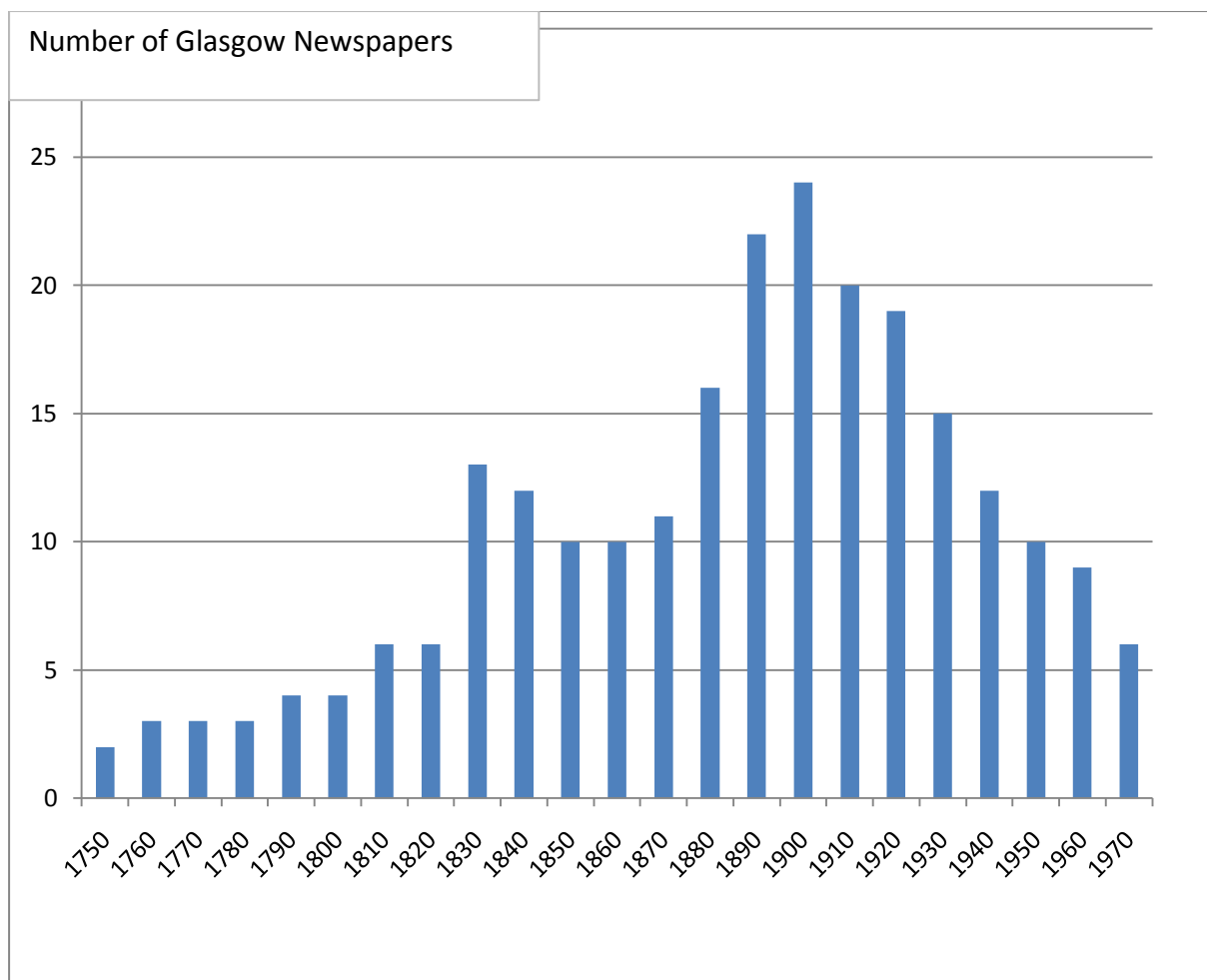
¹⁴ *That Vital Spark*, p.104

¹⁵ Andrew Nash, *Kailyard and Scottish Literature* (Amsterdam / New York: Rodopi, 2007), p.198

¹⁶ Philip Waller, *Writers, Readers and Reputations, Literary Life in Britain 1870-1918* (Oxford: OUP, 2006), p.981

¹⁷ Joe Fisher, *Glasgow Newspapers, 1715-1979: A Chronological Guide* (Glasgow: Glasgow Room, 1979)

¹⁸ Joan P.S. Ferguson, *The Directory of Scottish Newspapers* (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1984)



Unfortunately, details of the *Evening News*' circulation figures are not available, nor is there any published history of the paper. Generally, literary material and comment on Glasgow papers is scarce although the *Herald* and *Daily Record* have compiled their own histories.

In political terms, the *Glasgow Evening Post* version of the paper, in 1866-88, is described as "liberal. By 1915 The Evening News is described as an "independent" paper and the Mitchell's Newspaper Directory notes:

It has earlier and later editions than any other paper in the district and besides a resume of the events of the day and the latest telegraphic news, it daily contains special articles on social and domestic subjects; and is read by all classes of the community. It has full commercial intelligence.¹⁹

¹⁹ John S. North (ed), *The Waterloo Directory of Scottish Newspapers and Periodicals, 1800-1900* (Ontario: North Waterloo Academic Press, 1989), p.533

In conducting the research, it is apparent that *The Evening News* contains a wide mixture of news articles, opinion pieces, entertainment and book reviews, general notices and sports reporting. Munro's pieces always occupied the same space in the paper, across four or five columns at the bottom of page two, with other features on other topics occupying the space on the other days.

Munro produced his two columns with the same style and attitude, adopting an informal, discursive manner which depended on, and represented, his own views on the matter at hand. Despite the fact that his columns were anonymous or unattributed (as were the majority in the *Evening News*) he attempted to establish his own "personality", to establish a character or voice the public could respond to, identify with, and hence engage with or challenge publishers and authors on this personal basis. Many of his columns were cast as imaginary conversations, a good way of giving several points of view without committing oneself.²⁰ As Beata Kohlbeek notes, this type of journalism did not emerge until the 1890s and Munro was one of the first journalists to grasp the opportunity.²¹

In describing the status quo, H.G. Wells noted that literary criticism in the 1890s had some odd conventions, being either scholarly or with scholarly pretensions, and was dominated by the mediaeval assumption that whatever is worth knowing is already known and whatever is worth doing has already been done.²² On placing the writer, and his views, at the heart of the review, Munro directly challenged this approach.

Matthew Arnold, in an article in *The Nineteenth Century* magazine in 1897, termed this new style of writing "the New Journalism", stating that it was a "miscellany of considerations,

²⁰ Neil Munro – *The Biography*, p.77

²¹ *Exploring New Roads*, p.127

²² *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.187

typefaces and layout”: the style was less stuffy, more informal than traditional writing, with varied content and style, incorporating a number of methods - interviews and profiles, exposés and investigations, personal sidelines and gossip, sensation and human interest stories. Articles were shorter but sharper and more partisan, passing on political and sociological views.²³

In articles published in the 1890s Munro himself classified his approach as “Impressionism”, simply meaning that it was based on his own impressions of what was happening around him. He was not primarily referring to the school of “Impressionist” art. In a *Views and Reviews* article on 26th December 1895 he expressed his view that this approach constituted a “New Criticism” of Art; that a critic should convey expressions of temperament, and not a discussion on the make-up of a picture or piece of art. As he stated on 4th June 1896, “Impressionism was the only due method employable for the presentation of human life, not realism or spiritual idealism”. It was effectively photographic: “it comprehends all things proportionately, therefore it is the only true realism”. Just under a year later, on 29th April 1897, he went so far as to claim that “the Impressionist is the greatest force in modern journalism”.

Throughout his journalistic career Neil Munro used a wide variety of methods and techniques to make his weekly columns more entertaining and engaging for his large and regular readership. His promotion of dialogue and use of a narrator figure as catalyst made his work informative, popular and, most importantly, immediate. Although we can

²³ *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.85

speculate that Munro acted and saw himself as the narrator in his articles and stories, perhaps he instead became invisible in order that his work could flourish, in line with T.S. Eliot's proposal that "the progress of an artist is a continual self-sacrifice, a continual extinction of personality."²⁴

²⁴ T.S. Eliot, *Tradition and the Individual Talent*, accessed at www.mnstate.edu on 21st May 2010

4. The Looker-On

The Looker-On column first appeared on Monday, 23rd August 1897 and, from the start, Munro attempted to adopt a more strident and direct journalistic tone than in *Views and Reviews* as he highlighted and commented on the social and cultural issues which affected the population of Glasgow.

The Looker-On started by tackling the local and parochial: the tradesman and his family trying to board a train on a trades holiday; is “tricycle” one word or two in a telegram; protests against the vertical system of handwriting being taught in the Board Schools of Glasgow. However, Munro also backed the working and lower classes in the face of criticism or sarcasm from the middle and upper classes, seeing a nobility and decency in the manners and actions of the put-upon although he himself was perceived as a trend-setter for, and representative of, the upper orders. By the end of the nineteenth century developments in industry, through a succession of stages of industrialisation and the establishment of a formal and compulsory education system, had made the working class population of the west of Scotland both literate and skilled (three quarters of the male workforce was either skilled or semi-skilled).²⁵ Whereas in the *Views and Reviews* column he developed a gentle, meandering approach to issues, in *The Looker-On* he sometimes took an aggressive stance initially, perhaps before finding a mature, comfortable and convincing voice. He adopted a scatter-gun approach each week, jamming together an eclectic combination of topics, attacking establishment figures and organisations and bemoaning the slightest, most trivial domestic matters.

²⁵ Michael Lynch, *Scotland, A New History* (London: Pimlico, 1992), p.407

This uncomfortable mixture is evidenced in the early columns. The first *Looker-On*, on 23rd August 1897, initially considers the inappropriateness of standing out-of-doors to take in a band concert:

To stand and listen to music for more than 10 minutes at a time is like reading a Family Bible in bed, a thing a wise person never does.

Munro then moves onto other matters: the payment of £43,000 to acquire part of the Dixon Blazes to expand the Glasgow Green, the type of person who is likely to take his chances in the Klondike (a regular topic) and a lament that members of the “Glasgow Boys” are leaving Glasgow to work in London. However, in other weeks he was directly attacking public bodies (particularly the City Council) and establishment figures in a number of important social and societal areas.

Glasgow had the highest prevalence of over-crowded and substandard tenement housing in the country, with seven out of ten Glaswegians living in one- or two-roomed dwellings by 1901.²⁶ On 13th September 1897, Munro makes the point that the lack of decent housing shames the city, which in his time was being municipalised in many areas, and grants it a poor reputation and distorted image:

Next to our fame for shipbuilding, those one-room houses are the first of our characteristics that the outside thinks of when the name of Glasgow is mentioned, and upon the condition of things they suggest the outsider is ready to build up some very odd imaginings.

Although Munro enjoyed the support and friendship of the gentry (particularly the Duke of Argyll) on 25th October 1897 he attacks the efforts of the Duchess of Sutherland in promoting her Home Industry Association with the aim of increasing home working in the crofting communities of rural areas of Scotland, stating:

²⁶ *Scotland, A New History*, p.413

The sale of a few extra hundred yards of homespun will not repeople the glens of Sutherland from which her Grace's ancestors cleared countless families to make room for the sheep and the deer.

He also highlights the inequalities present in the provision of services and the consideration of requirements across the City, particularly contrasting the West and East Ends, the prosperous and the poor. This examination covers areas such as police corruption in Springburn, where Munro proposes that the Police acted improperly. On 18th October 1897 he writes:

What St Rollox seems to suffer from is too little Improvement Trust and too much Police? [sic]

[...] Kelvinside has no idea of the eternal arrogance and tyranny of the police in the poorer districts of the city where they are looked upon by the unfortunate people as the most exclusive embodiment of the law and not as the cheapest party of the Law's mechanism.

The following week he champions the requirement to involve local people in the management of the new People's Palace and keep it open on a Sunday to facilitate the working man's use of the building and promote his appreciation of art:

Already there are signs that the "Sane Sunday" question must be thrashed out in connection with the People's Palace. If the Palace is to be a winter garden there will be no logical excuse for shutting it on a Sunday [...] There is no place under heaven where the Sunday is so terrible as it is in the East End of Glasgow.

As well as commenting on events he described the behaviour and attitudes of the people of Glasgow, holding up a mirror on their prejudices and manners, taking them to task if their actions did not tally with his standards. On 4th October 1897, he says of Glasgow people:

We are often brusque, pushing, curt and selfish, true products of commercial and strenuous operations. We are not primitive enough and we are not cultured enough

Munro's attitude towards his fellow Glaswegians was robust and full-blooded, defensive and intolerant of the working man in turn, consistently inconsistent, poking and balancing both

sides of an argument, sometimes for fun and entertainment, sometimes in regret and condemnation. As he grew in confidence in his new column he adopted a more literary tone, unable as Osborne and Armstrong state, to forget his novelist's art when he entered the *Evening News* office.²⁷ This is epitomised in the column printed on 11th October 1897, when Munro describes how a man who handed out offensive pamphlets in Buchanan Street (Petrie, the mad barber) was committed to Woodilee, a local mental hospital. Munro rallies against those respectable members of the public who laughed at Petrie, thought his behaviour funny and innocent and attempted to intervene to stop his incarceration in Woodilee:

Truly it is a mad world and our greatest follies are accomplished in the name of charity and good intention [...] We are looking about for a pathetic little cause that wants our powerful propping up; something or somebody in dire straits must be defended by us brave kind folks – on as cheap terms as possible.

Here Munro sees the human being and realises that the authorities are pursuing his safety and the greater good. His thoughts may be contrary but his writing is compassionate and assertive and he does not rail against his target; he is calm and in control.

Munro seemed to gain confidence and started to adopt the methods successfully used in the *Views and Reviews* columns, becoming less rhetorical and more discursive, using his cast of characters to consider the ins and outs of an issue rather than tackling it “head-on”. Consequently, in a *Looker-On* episode on 20th December 1897, Munro places The Traveller, the Musician, the Reporter and the Boss in “a discussion in the club on Saturday about the relative charms of cities at home and abroad”. Their interchange covers a wide range of topics and whereas previous columns sometimes feel like a rant or lecture, the group

²⁷ *That Vital Spark*, p.137

discussion allows each topic to be aired in a considered, careful and calm manner but with the author's views still clear.

5. The Cast

Neil Munro used a variety of techniques in his columns to present his own thoughts and opinions and facilitate the discussion of issues and views. He often used a group setting in his episodic fiction to allow a particular event or situation to grow and unfold in front of the reader. We observe the crew of the Vital Spark at work and play around their various ports of call, we overhear Erchie and Jinniet MacPherson and Duffy the coalman and his current wife in conversation at a particular social setting in Glasgow, we marvel at how Jimmy Swan integrates his views with those of his customers, making them feel valued and important, regardless of their social or commercial standing.

In many circumstances Munro used an un-named narrator or commentator in his stories: Para Handy meets his associate at the quayside at the Broomielaw and catches up with the news and gossip in the city and on Loch Fyne, or Erchie meets his “newspaper friend”, usually on a Saturday afternoon or evening, on the way to or from St Kentigern’s Kirk, and fills him in on the minutiae of the workings of the church, the council or society in general. The interjection of an external and nameless narrator (that is, external to the core group) allows the main characters to gossip and chat about current affairs and familial events, and any action is recounted rather than acted out. We hear Para Handy’s, or Erchie’s or Jimmy’s version of events, with their habitual verbal and grammatical tics and mannerisms. Their inner thoughts are revealed side-by-side with their personalities, through repetition and chorusing.

Munro’s most accomplished and sophisticated method of portraying discussion is by the use of “The Cast”, as I have termed it. Instead of adopting his usual first-person voice in his newspaper writing he establishes a place or setting and inhabits it with some members of

his cast of characters. They then have a discussion, on a wide range of matters, presenting different, often contrasting and contradictory opinions. This device encourages a contrast with what might be considered the critic's usual role: instead of making a definite individual judgement on an artefact, determining its worth in black and white, the writer encourages dialogue and discussion, postponing judgement, leaving his views open-ended and distributed among the group members.

His first attempt at using this device was in *Views and Reviews* on 10th September 1896. Munro assembles a group at a grouse shoot at the Monaveckatanmhor Lodge and records their conversation regarding the state and health of contemporary literature. This cast consists of the Major, the Author, the Librarian and the Man with the Red Tie. They talk about the merits of contemporary authors, the rise in popularity of female writers and the possible fall in sales of the Kailyard authors. Munro successfully uses this technique in many *Views and Reviews* columns in the period under examination: at the Club (on 19th November 1896), at a smoking concert (17th December 1896) and on a sail from Roseneath to Helensburgh (on 20th May 1897). In *Views and Reviews* on 4th November 1897 the column discusses the work and reputation of Kipling, speculating on his "big head", his gift of celebratory poetry to *The London Times* and his apparent lack of sincerity as well as touching on a new, up-and-coming author as the Major asks "Can anyone tell me who Joseph Conrad is?"

Munro's cast included the characters noted in the table below. They can be grouped into four categories – writing and publishing, academics, professions and occupations and others. Munro does not provide any personal or background details on his cast members and they may be seen as stereotypes, symbols or ciphers. It is evident that, in the main,

they are representatives of the middle or upper-middle classes. The cast members are well educated, in positions of responsibility and authority, taking on the roles of decision makers and opinion shapers. They shoot and fish, gather in clubs, engage in literary and artistic pursuits. The Major is the instigator of group activity, his naive questions sparking debate; the Man with the Red Tie tries to summarise a coherent conclusion; the Youth is impatient and easily impressed; the Critic is sarcastic and keen to show off his insider knowledge. It is tempting to try to see Munro as one, some or all of the characters used (especially those in the writing and publishing field) but there is no information to allocate any of the characters and his preferential role.

The Cast			
Writing / Publishing	Academic	Professions / Occupations	Others
The Reporter	The Librarian	The Commercial Traveller	The Youth
The Publisher	The Professor	The Boss The Lay Member	The Man with the Red Tie
The Critic		The Skipper The Electrician	The New Man
The Writer		The Artist The Musician	
The Author		The Major	

On 20th December 1897, Munro uses a small cast of the above characters in *The Looker-On* for the first time when a group meet at their Club to discuss the burning issues of the day. The range of discussion is wide: the relative charms of cities – at home and abroad, Lord Overtoun's coercion of the masses in Glasgow, Wagner, the superiority of a Scottish Sunday, the vice of drunkenness and the impending opening of the People's Palace on Glasgow

Green. The trivial and serious, parochial and international, low and high, sit side-by-side, all contained in the exchange of conversation in a typical night out.

Munro used the device of the Cast to present all sides of an argument and promote debate. It also granted him freedom to be indecisive and vague, to postpone judgement and reserve his position, to indulge in conversations which didn't come to a tidy conclusion but remained elusive, ready to be re-opened and reconsidered when new details or news became available. This technique served his journalism, promoted engagement with his reading audience by linking up diverse cultural and social issues and topics, using conversation, discussion and dialogue between various voices to rehearse a variety of views and opinions, keeping everything open-ended and fluid. Munro also added other critics' and authors' opinions to this debate, with cast members adding what they had read or heard, creating a forum for discussion which was modelled on the classical tradition, using Socratic dialogue rather than vatic critical judgement.

6. What is (Scottish) Literature?

Neil Munro expressed his preference for Scottish literature and, in the main, romance throughout his journalistic career. His own fiction was concerned with the fabulous, focussing on outdoor action, athletic heroes, trust and intrigue. However, the trajectory, from Scott to Stevenson to Neil Munro, shows increasing crisis and discomfort in this mode of fiction. Munro had very definite views on the essential aspects and characteristics of literature, in general, and Scottish literature, in particular.

On 17th June 1920, when reviewing the Rev. T McWilliam's "Scottish Life in Light and Shadow", Munro makes his most comprehensive statement on the nature of Scottish Literature and how it had to change. He starts the column:

The function of a national literature is to interpret the life and characteristics of a people in the language of that people. So far as Scotland is concerned, therefore, there is no national literature.

This opening salvo, with its linking of a national literature with the life and language of the people, places Munro beside Edwin Muir's later assertion on the same topic.

If we are to have a complete and homogenous literature it is necessary that we should have a complete and homogenous language. Two such languages exist in Scotland and two only. The one is Gaelic and the other is English.

And of the two alternatives English is the only practicable one at present, whatever Gaelic may become in the future.²⁸

Muir identified the tension in language as between Gaelic and English and while Munro would have agreed with the overpowering dominance of his native tongue he also identified Scots (or Braid Scots as he names it) as a national, if rural-based, language, as noted below.

²⁸ From *Scott and Scotland*, Edwin Muir 1936, in Margery McCulloch, *Modernism and Nationalism* (Glasgow: ASLS, 2004), p.42

Munro also acknowledged that the popular idea of Scottish literature was grounded in romanticism and did not reflect the modern day. He took the view that literature used to mirror its own society and its issues but that current works still harked back to a previous time and situation, remaining nostalgic and historical. While he praises Scott and Stevenson for being contemporary in their own times he does not excuse his own tendency, in his novels, to dwell in the past.

Modern authors of Scots birth leave the modern Scot alone. When they write of Scotland they go back to one "age of romance" or another, unwilling or unable to see romance today.

There was a national literature in Scott's day. "Old Mortality" was a first-class piece of contemporary literature. Some of Stevenson's stories were interpretations of contemporary life, and Neil Munro, in various manners, has painted the contemporary Highlander. Barrie and Crockett, too, were topical in their "kailyard" manner.

In addition, Munro criticised the overwhelming emphasis on life in rural Scotland in literature, acknowledging that the lack of examination of how Scots live in an industrial society denied the majority of the population a place, a voice, in the arts. The continuation of the presentation of the stereotypes of Scottishness, of the Highland life, of the noble savage wandering the misty glens is at fault, a simple picture postcard view of an uncomplicated, black-and-white insular world.

Yet not one of these greater men tackled the greatest problem that a Scottish writer can face. They wrote, each one of them, of rural types.

[...] But Scotland is not mainly a country of peasants. It is mainly an industrial country. And until a writer of power tackles the psychology – such a complex psychology! – of Scots under industrial conditions, we must take it that Scottish literature is moribund.

Munro identified the issues and the need for change, a view not recognised by Beth Dickson in 1987.

In this (Scotland), one of the most industrialised areas of the world, it was rare to find writers dealing with the realities of the social experience. As many critics have pointed out, the major Scottish writers of the period around the turn of the century – George Douglas

Brown, J McDougall Hay, Neil Munro and J.M. Barrie – rarely acknowledge that they live in an industrial country at all.²⁹

He does acknowledge his part in maintaining the focus on rural Scotland in his novels, while identifying that there is an inescapable case for change and modernisation. Also, although Dickson is right in highlighting the rural location of these authors' fiction, many works were concerned with the impact of a creeping industrialisation on the terms of rural life, such as the impact of the railways and the mining industry on Barbie in *The House with the Green Shutters*.

Earlier, Munro had rehearsed his views on the attributes of a "national literature" and identified some important general features. On 6th May 1897, in considering a question from Maclaren, "Who will write the American Novel – James, Cable, Wilkins, Allen or Garland?" he outlines why, in his opinion, this could not be done:

There will be no distinctly "American Novel" because there can't be. A novel which will be a microcosm of complex, hotchpotch American society – English, Irish, German, "Dago", Negro and Chinese – would be a terrible thing to read, and is luckily not imminent by some centuries.

[...] As for a comprehensive conception of America, its growth, flux, fret and future – who can want a better picture than Whitman has given?

Munro seems to take the self-contradictory view that a novel must convey a consistent and complete view of a national character except if this view is too complex and inconsistent. While he heralds a new dawn he wants it to be represented in the novel in a simple and straightforward manner, perhaps indicating his fears that the novel form lacks sophistication. On 22nd April 1897 he writes "...All that can be asked of a novel or any work

²⁹ Beth Dickson, p.49

of art is that it should not be unedifying.” and on 11th November 1897 that “the full dignity of the novel is yet to be discovered.”

On 4th September 1919, when coming across a book, “Recent and Living Scottish Poets”, which was published forty years before, Munro states:

it reminded me once more that the truest artistic expression of Scottish sentiment came from unknown to fame, and the songs we regard as most truly national were piped on rustic people lutes [...] They were at their best in dialect and at their worst in English.

And:

The path was cut long ago by Allan Ramsay, Burns [...] and a remarkable group of women including Joanna Baillie [...] Lady Ann Lindsay [...] Mrs Grant of Laggan [...] Mrs John Hunter [...] and Caroline Oliphant. Add the names of Hector MacNeil, Alan Cunningham, Robert Fergusson and Tannahill and the strength of the tradition begins to be comprehended.

His identification of the importance of Scots along the continuum of Scottish Literature, always tied to the rural aspect of Scottish life, again may be simply nostalgic. Twenty years before he had lamented the weak position of Scots when reporting on the language options to be included in the 1901 Census, for while columns for Gaelic and Gaelic-and-English speakers (perhaps Munro’s own priorities) were to be included he had received a request to petition for the inclusion of Scots. He notes, in a *Looker-On* column on 13th February 1899,

It will be difficult for a good many respectable people to decide for themselves whether they speak Scots – or only Gleska, its most dreadful variant.

But – one confesses the dreadful truth with reluctance – Braid Scots is a decaying tongue. It survives in the rural districts among the older people [...] All this portends that before many generations the only Scotsmen who speak their native tongue will be in London.³⁰

In the same article, he draws comparisons and parallels with the previous suppression of Gaelic, recalling that pupils were beaten at school if they spoke the language used at home,

³⁰ *That Vital Spark*, p.107

that English was the only reputable and respectable tongue of commerce, law and education and even folk songs and children's rhymes were being anglicised.

Munro had a belief that "good" literature had to impart the writer's view of life and aspire always to art. On 14th May 1896, when considering Stephen Crane's book he made the point that "The work of pure realism, such as *The Red Badge of Courage* is, fails. It may thrill at a first reading, but it bears the same relation to a great work that a photograph of Battersea Bridge does to Whistler's painting". It was the writer's intervention in, and his interpretation of, real life that made his work art. On 28th October 1897, he again puts the artist's views and emotions at the centre of the creative process:

But style is not structure, syntax, assonance, alliteration, preciousness of phrase alone: it is something exclusive and personal that has never been the same in two men; it is, as the phrase goes, the man himself. It is his mood, his accent, his outlook on life.

He knows what he has written in that most rare abstraction is charged with every thrill of his own heart, and that sooner or later it will find its answering thrill in the hearts of other men and women.

Later that same year, on 16th December, Munro virtually copies Conrad's definition of art from the introduction of *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, published that year, into his newspaper piece, stating, with specific reference to Conrad:

Any work, he says, that aspires, however humbly, to the condition of art, should carry its own justification in every single line. He defines any art as a single-minded attempt to render the highest kind of justice to the visible universe by bringing to light the truth, manifold and one, underlying its every aspect.

[...] And the art of fiction, he says, appeals to temperament [...] It must make its appeal through the senses if its high desire is to reach the secret spring of responsive emotions [...] Fiction must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting and to the magic suggestiveness of music, which says Mr Conrad, is the art of arts.

By 26th June 1919, after reviewing Zane Grey's popular cowboy story *The Light of the Western Stars* (and condemning it with the comment "[...] many of my leisure hours have

been passed in perusal of the story rejoicing in the promising title of 'The Light of the Western Stars'. I cannot but account it wasted time") he places a duty on the written word, in any and every format saying:

every book – novel, biography, polemic – must pass the bar. Every book published, in short, is open to judgement as literature. If literature is to serve an important function, it must be helpful, stimulating.

Munro expected much from literature and its writers. He insisted that Scottish literature must represent a contemporary Scotland and the views and language of its people. He relied on simple, direct arguments and analysis, supported by passion and humanity, to portray his country, rejecting any representation of uncertainty and complexity. His approach to criticism, generally, was that of a good reporter. He was wary of literary devices and cleverness. This is not to deny the subtlety of characterisation and narrative development in his novels and episodic fiction, but to emphasise that he considered stylistic experimentation inappropriate for a clear representation of contemporary Scotland.

He therefore denied the appropriateness and trappings of modernism in his views of Scottish literature. This approach is certainly justifiable in his journalism, where basic standards of topic, language and style are dictated by editorial policy and design; it is less appropriate in novels where the reader purchases the work and engages in a more direct and specific way with the text, sanctioning experiments in time, space and narrative. Yet it is possible to argue that Munro's preferences derive directly from his pre-war journalism and are justified by his continuing episodic fiction, as we shall see.

7. Romance – Burns, Scott and Stevenson

As a novelist Neil Munro mainly concentrated on historical novels: *John Splendid* (1897), *Gillian the Dreamer* (1899), *Doom Castle* and *Shoes of Fortune* (both 1901), *Children of Tempest* (1903) and *The New Road* (1914). They are usually set in the West Highlands and Argyll of his birthplace. He was following a romantic form of fiction, after Sir Walter Scott and Robert Louis Stevenson, using noble (but often flawed) characters, sublime highland landscapes (which were the context for difficult economic realities), and troubled histories to create narratives which conveyed his vision of Highland Scotland. He utilised some of the same literary devices as Scott and Stevenson in his historical novels: the convention of doubled heroes, the descriptions of panoramic landscapes, the main character's intellectual, emotional and actual journey.³¹ However, Munro emphasised the mystical and fantastic aspects of his own work, especially in the early short stories, collected as *The Lost Pibroch*.

Munro states his definition of "romance" and the sense of importance attached to the influence of the Scots ballads in a *Views and Reviews* column on 30th July 1896:

Romance, as the word is now commonly understood, is the fabulous, the purely imaginative (it covers both "She" and Zola's "Rome") [...] the best romance in prose is always on the border line of poetry, a hint at the vista and depth of things, a momentary opening of the door to give a glimpse in to the realm of Faery.

And:

The essence of romance will be found in the ballads of Scotland [...] in all the European literature, even in the Troubadour [sic] verse of early France, there is not the same wealth of romantic conception as in the Scots ballad.

But, unlike Scott and Stevenson, Munro was a Gael, a native Gaelic speaker, and it can be argued that his use of English could have been influenced and modified by his native

³¹ Alan Riach, *Representing Scotland in Literature, Popular Culture and Iconography* (Hampshire: Palgrave, 2005), p.xvii

tongue. He once argued, perhaps with tongue in cheek, in a *Looker-On* article on 3rd March 1898, that for him the term “Scot” was too all-encompassing and there had been established,

a new movement on the part of an important section of the people of North Britain, having for its aim the abandonment of the terms of Scot and Scotsman as present applied without distinction to the whole of the people resident north of the Border. That the Highlanders of Scotland should so long have tacitly agreed to their separate and peculiar racial characteristics and history being ignored by the Lowlander in his invariable slumping of Sassenach and Gael as “Scottish” is certainly surprising enough when one considers the national pride and punctilio of the race.

He modified the established narrative of the Highlands, as it had been described by Scott and Stevenson, to put a Gaelic perspective in place and reclaim the differences in culture from a Lowland viewpoint. As Douglas Gifford et al state:

without Munro’s subtle amendments to the historical perspectives of Scott and Stevenson, significant revision of the way we read the Highlands would have taken much longer.³²

Despite this perspective, in his columns Munro makes reference to three of his romantic and literary heroes: Burns, Scott and Stevenson. Although none of the three are Gaelic speakers and their vision of Scotland is grounded in, and expressed from, a Lowland point-of-view, Munro sees something very significant in their work.

Munro makes many comments about Burns in the *Views and Reviews* columns under examination, particularly around 1895, perhaps anticipating the 100th anniversary of the poet’s death in 1896 and the publication of new anthologies of his work. In particular Munro reviews the Centenary, Chambers and national editions in his column on 19th September 1895. On 29th August 1895 he states: “Burns’ simplistic lyrics sit close to the heart universal and stir happier emotions than the most profound economic thought of an

³² Gifford, Dunnigan and MacGillivray (eds), *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: EUP, 2002), p.326

Adam Smith". Munro is able to acknowledge the influence of Burns' predecessors on his works. On 22nd August 1895 he notes, when reviewing Robert Fergusson's poems in the first Volume of the *Scots Library*, "The Farmer's Ingle is in the present writer's humble opinion a better poem than The Cottar's Saturday Night". Later, in a *Looker-On* column on 27th December 1897, when complaining about the demise of the Scottish Hogmanay he recalls "the 'daft days' Fergusson sang a century ago, in ingenious verse whose rhyme and realism gave suggestion to the pen of Robert Burns. "

On both occasions he acknowledges the poet's importance and influence and takes the chance to praise and name-check Fergusson. Perhaps he wished to acknowledge Fergusson because he was out of fashion at that time, awaiting rediscovery in the Scottish Renaissance to follow, or in recognition of his influence on Burns.

On 22nd January 1920, Munro tackles the issue of Burns Clubs and he worries that the existence of these clubs obscures rather than clarifies our understanding of Burns' work, as it promotes aspects of his life rather than his poems and songs.

Otherwise the Burns Clubs – though they admirably illustrate the strength of Scottish patriotism – yet have a detrimental effect on the purity of our criticisms and applications. Their influence moves us to sentimentalise our national view of the national bard, destroys our initial liberty by insisting on a wholesale acceptance as good of everything that Burns wrote and confuses the literary view by stressing aspects of the life of the man rather than the verse of the poet [...] the circumstances of his life signify nothing now.

He concludes his analysis with a strong endorsement of Burns' poems, placing them in a British (and European context, in an earlier comparison of Burns and Paul Verlaine³³), rather than the narrow Scottish one, despite their down-to-earth provenance.

³³ *Views and Reviews*, 23rd January 1896

God help us of Scotland if we substitute an anaemic abstraction, the spirit of Burns' worst work, for the red-blooded reality of the peasant! [...] give him his due for what he was, pure and simple, with Shelley, Coleridge, Wordsworth and Byron - a herald of the dawn.

Surprisingly, given their frictional relationship, his views on the Burns Clubs tallies very closely with Hugh MacDiarmid's later comments on the "Burns Cult":

A considerable experience of Burns Clubs has shown the present writer that the Burnsian element in them is exceedingly small; the great majority of the members do not know their Burns even [...] The bias of the inner circle of enthusiasts has led them in the past to concentrate on bibliographical and genealogical pursuits, preservation of place interests, establishment of "shrines", erection of monuments – anything and everything connected with the externalities of Burns and his work rather than upon appreciation of the man's true character and significance and continuance of his work and the attempt to perpetuate his spirit and realise his ideals.³⁴

Munro's view that Burns had been sentimentalised was later shared with Edwin Muir who noted:

The Burns of popular legend is an imaginative incarnation of a people's popular desires, unfulfilled in life. It has no fundamental resemblance to Burns himself.

And

From a literary point of view, the cult is merely an obstructive nuisance.³⁵

In reference to Sir Walter Scott, Munro rates him as the paragon of Scottish Literature and his work the definition of Scottish Literature. However he is suspicious of his Lowland heritage, stating in *Views and Reviews* on 25th March 1897 that Scott's version of the Celt, like William Black's in *Briseis*, "is the Celt from the Macbrayne tourist point of view". Gifford et al note that William Black was renowned for his "melodramatic exploitation of Scottish stereotypes" and considered a "darling of the lending libraries".³⁶ Munro had the opportunity to comment on Scott's work. Many of Scott's works were republished late in

³⁴ Hugh MacDiarmid, "The Burns Cult (1)", 23rd July 1926, in *Contemporary Scottish Studies* (Edinburgh: 1976), p.112

³⁵ Edwin Muir, *Scottish Journey* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1935/2008), p.91

³⁶ *Scottish Literature*, p.323-4

the nineteenth century as a consequence of the 1842 Copyright Act which had established copyright for a period of forty-two years from first publication date or seven years after the author's death, whatever was the longer.³⁷ Also, demand for fiction exploded and although the 1850 Public Libraries Act was extended to Scotland in 1853, steps were being taken to municipalise these services in Glasgow as the century closed.

Munro saw Scott as the founder, the originator, of the Scottish romantic novel and noted a trail of influence from Scott and Dumas through Stevenson to himself. In *Views and Reviews* on 13th May 1920 he writes, in a piece on Stevenson's *Kidnapped* and *Catriona*:

Alan Breck is the chief delight of those two stories. One remembers however, that Dugald Dalgetty existed before him, and one can – by way of a literary exercise – trace the parentage of Alan and John Splendid back to such a typical Lowlander as Walter Scott - with Dumas as collateral.

Munro held Robert Louis Stevenson in the highest regard but, as with Scott, he did not endorse his work without reservation, comparing Stevenson's work with his contemporaries. Again he had plenty of opportunities to review Stevenson in *News and Reviews* as a large number of his works were published, or republished, just after his death. On 21st November 1895, he notes that "The Stevenson letters should be read by all who admire the man's life work and appreciate the chrystalline (sic) beauty of his work". On 19th December 1895, in reviewing *A Child's Garden of Verses* he compliments the volume saying, "The Robert Louis Stevenson book is a joy to the eye almost as great as the matter of it is to the heart". Again, on 1st October 1896 he notes that "It is in *Songs of Travel* however we get the very best poetry Stevenson composed [...] it is a book to buy and treasure, the one which more than any of the rest contains most of the author's personality".

³⁷ *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.45

Munro's comment on the 21st May 1896 places the author in the company of the best writers in word literature, praising his ability to represent himself in his work, while maintaining his sociable, native personality:

Every novel of character is to some extent a work of self revelation, but it is only in the rare instance you discover an author who can afford to wear his heart on his sleeve...Cervantes and Shakespeare, Whitman, Thomas Hughes and R. L. Stevenson – does every one of them fascinate as much by his personality as by the merit of his work?

He (Stevenson) went a Scots convoy with you at midnight after two glasses of port and he told you everything on the way.

However, in a contrary fashion, similar to his statement on Scott, Munro undermines this in regard to Stevenson in his public lecture entitled "The Modern Novel", delivered in April 1906. He states there:

There is no modern novelist I like better, but I think Stevenson's work, beautiful though it is, was not a fresh start, and so he does not quite come within the scope of my argument. He simply carried on the romantic traditions of Scott and Dumas and brought them to the pitch of refinement where it is almost impossible to go further, and refinement is the last stage that precedes decay.³⁸

Although this research is concerned solely with Neil Munro's journalism, the importance of this last comment must be examined in relation to his career and writing. Munro considered Stevenson's work to be an extension of the romantic style of Scott and Dumas but so refined and so perfect that it was trapped by its own stylistic poise, at full bloom close to decay, reaching the point of stagnation and narrative inertia. At the same time he saw himself as a romantic writer and novelist, working in the same tradition, albeit more influenced by his Gaelic upbringing. However, he temporarily stopped writing romantic and historic novels after the publication of *Children of Tempest* in 1903, turning to the episodic fiction first published in the *Evening News*, and more contemporary fiction (in *The Daft Days*

³⁸ *Exploring New Roads*, p.231

in 1907 and *Fancy Farm* in 1910), only returning to the historical mode in *The New Road*, published in 1914.

8. The Stylists

Beata Kohlbeck considers Neil Munro's journalistic work to be the key to seeing "Neil Munro as he was seen by his contemporaries: as one of the central figures in Glasgow, surrounded by artists, writers and always at the heart of contemporary affairs".³⁹ As a literary critic he was able to consider and promote the work of favourite writers within his columns, those who had yet to find commercial success or were unlikely to reach and command a mass audience.

Andrew Nash agrees with R.C. Terry's point that by the 1890s the assumption of a catholicity of taste, where both critics and readers refused to categorise novels or differentiate between quality and popular works, was beginning to splinter and the question of what constituted "serious literature" as opposed to mere popular success became a topic of heated debate.⁴⁰ Munro seemed to support this change in approach, promoting authors and artists whom he considered to epitomise "good" art and deriding authors who pursued success by all means. While noting the success of authors such as Marie Corelli and Hall Caine, Munro also recorded his concern at their marketing strategies: the publication and glorification of the author's life through newspaper interviews and features to increase book sales (then called "pumping"), the discounting of books, the use of their image and their works in product advertising (at this time S.R. Crockett advertised Waterman pens across the world). Munro parodies them both in an *Erchie* episode ("Erchie on the King's Cruise", around August 1902).

The yacht made first for the Isle o' Man, and wasna five meenutes in the place when the great novelist, Hall Corelli or Mary Caine, or whichever it is, was aboard o' her distributin'

³⁹ *Exploring New Roads*, p.207

⁴⁰ *Kailyard and Scottish Literature*, p.171

hand-bills advertisin' her latest novel, and the King took fright, and left the place as soon as he could.⁴¹

Munro, with other critics, chose to champion artists who were artistically successful but less commercially popular. He championed a number of "stylists" including Joseph Conrad, R.B. Cunningham Graham and Walt Whitman.

Joseph Conrad was both an inspiration and a friend of Neil Munro. They met on two occasions in Glasgow, the details noted in Lesley Lendrum's biography.⁴² On 18th September 1898, Conrad visited Glasgow to try and get the command of a Scottish ship and dined with Munro and Dr John Macintyre, R.B. Cunningham Graham having provided him with a letter of introduction. Dr Macintyre was a renowned nose and throat specialist and an early pioneer of x-rays. The hospitality extended to Conrad reflected the interests of both his hosts; he was x-rayed in Dr Macintyre's basement and taken on a pub crawl by Munro. On 20th April 1923, Conrad met Munro at the St Enoch Hotel as the Polish author made a stop while travelling to America.

While walking Glasgow on their first meeting Munro convinced Conrad that he would become an "honorary Glaswegian" if he could throw a chuckie-stane into the top hat belonging to the James Oswald statue in George Square. Munro later included this ritual in an *Erbie* story ("The Grand Old Man Comes Down"), published on 19th March 1923, a month before his friend's return to Glasgow:

⁴¹ Neil Munro, *Erbie, My Droll Friend* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005), p.40

⁴² Neil Munro - *The Biography*, p.84 and p.242

The only yin (statue) in George Square that attracts attention noo is Mr Oswald wi' the lum hat, for it has never occurred to anybody to put a lid on the had [sic] to keep the boys fae pappin' stones in't.⁴³

On 4th November 1897, in *Views and Reviews*, we have this:

Can anyone tell me, asked the Major, who Joseph Conrad is? He seems to have been a sailor. For he writes about the sea in a manner that confesses the past master in navigation. There was a discussion about him in the Club the other night, and we decided finally that he knows more of the practical life on board ship than any living writer – Clark Russell included" [...] "I notice something of Loti's exoticism – in his language" said The Youth.

On 16th December 1897, on reviewing *The Nigger of the Narcissus*, Munro praises Conrad "essentially as an impressionist and a stylist" and as a unique and innovative author and artist:

A simple record of the homeward journey it is destitute of plot, so its appeal depends upon the treatment of the character of the seamen, its impressions of the ocean. No sea tale quite of the same character has been written before [...] none [...] wrote of the sea with the same poetry and art that Mr Joseph Conrad displays.

And:

Fiction must strenuously aspire to the plasticity of sculpture, to the colour of painting and to the magic suggestiveness of music, which says Mr Conrad, is the art of arts.

Later, in reviewing *The Arrow of Gold* in 1919, Munro reflects back on Conrad's long, slow progression to literary success, while acknowledging his perceived literary weaknesses. On 21st August 1919 he writes,

"The Arrow of Gold" [...] leaves Conrad in absolute possession of the field of honour now that Thomas Hardy has surrendered the pen of the novelist.

[...] yet the heavy critical guns rumble away about technique and form

And on 11th September 1919 he added,

Joseph Conrad has now achieved the rare distinction of being at once affirmed by every critic as a classic and by the book vendor as a best seller. Yet few may realise how long and patient has been Conrad's climb to fame.

⁴³ *Erich, My Droll Friend*, p.551

These latter comments concur with Waller's comments on Conrad's reception in the newspaper and journal circles:

Conrad's reviewers were frequently also his friends: but they made little headway against the generality of newspapers and journals which, while gradually understanding that "the proper thing is to praise Mr Conrad's work", damned it with faint praise and always drew attention to its unnatural and difficult English prose style.⁴⁴

As noted previously, Munro was introduced to Conrad by R.B. Cunninghame Graham, a friend and support to Munro throughout his life. He and Sir Harry Lauder spoke at the unveiling of the Neil Munro monument in Glen Aray in 1935, with Cunninghame Graham stating that Munro was as "the apostolic successor of Sir Walter Scott".⁴⁵

Cunninghame Graham was a man of many roles and facets. He was a writer ("who kicks so violently against the conventional modern Scots idyll"⁴⁶), a Liberal MP for North West Lanarkshire, a member of the landed gentry owning estates along the Clyde, a socialist and a Scottish Nationalist. He was jailed in November 1887 in the "Bloody Sunday" demonstration in Trafalgar Square in London. He spent time in Latin America and Scotland; in Latin America he wore gaucho gear while at home he was the impeccable dandy aristocrat.⁴⁷ Joseph Conrad christened him "Prince Errant", the El Conquistador of lost causes, and named his approach to life "the philosophy of unutterable scorn".⁴⁸

In literary terms Cunninghame Graham is another who has lost his place in Scottish literature. Hugh MacDiarmid stated that Frank Harris called him "an amateur writer of genius" and he added "Heaven knows what he might have produced if he had been a

⁴⁴ *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.128

⁴⁵ <http://www.neilmunro.co.uk/biog.htm>, accessed 16th March 2010

⁴⁶ *Views and Reviews*, 17th September 1896

⁴⁷ *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.571

⁴⁸ "Robert Cunninghame Graham's South American Sketches" in *Hispania*, R. B. Stallman, Vol 28, Feb 1945, p.69, accessed at <http://www.jstor.org/stable/pdfplus/333960.pdf> on 16th March 2010

professional”.⁴⁹ His short stories are excellent and reflect his split in location, featuring Scottish and Latin American topics. “Beattock for Moffat” describes a train journey from London, the last trip home for a dying Andra in the company of his brother Jock and sister-in-law Jayne. “Charity” concerns Scots immigrants (Gaelic Catholics from Culloden) who are settled in San Andrés in Buenos Aires.

On 23rd December 1897, in *Views and Reviews*, Munro describes his piece “Snaekoll’s Saga” in the *Saturday Review* as,

the most robust and stimulating saga I ever sampled...this one of Mr Graham’s is quite homely and suggests our foreman compositor’s conversation style when “Views and Reviews” reach him too late for comfort on a Thursday morning.

Munro also expressed support for Walt Whitman, who seemed to both baffle and astound him. On 21st May 1896, he puts Whitman in the highest category of literary achievement, with Cervantes, Shakespeare, Thomas Hughes and R. L. Stevenson. He writes on 12th December 1895:

exasperating in his obscurity, his poems are mosaics of thought and although the general pattern will now and then baffle you there are little bits of thought in them complete and impressive by themselves.

He also observed the development of a Burns-type redefinition of Whitman’s life, writing on 2nd September 1897:

What all the admirers of the “good grey poet” (Whitmaniacs the profane them call) were predicting two years ago is coming to pass. Treated with a great degree of indifference in his life, he seems to be fated to canonisation in his death [...] (and yet) we are almost certainly only at the beginning of the movement.

[...] the dithyrambic chants of Whitman made him the Wagner of poets [...] Whitman’s poetry must be considered in vocal mass, not in parts [...] with physical vigour and spiritual quality of universal love or amateness.

⁴⁹ Hugh MacDiarmid, *Cunninghame Graham, A Centenary Study* (Glasgow: Caledonian Press, 1952), p.40

Munro's championship and appreciation of the literary qualities of the stylist accords very well with his stated philosophy of art, as expounded in his role of literary critic, and his mission to promote literature of worth. Munro approved of Conrad's definition of the writer's sole objective, written in 1897 as part of the introduction to *The Nigger of the Narcissus*,

My task, which I am trying to achieve is, by the power of the written word, to make you hear, to make you feel – it is, before all, to make you see.⁵⁰

However, this is at odds with Munro's later literary reception, as conveyed by his episodic and novelistic fiction, and his domestic reputation as a parochial and unsophisticated writer, constantly in the shadows of Scott and Stevenson. As a native Gaelic speaker Munro may have had some affinity with Conrad, whose declaration is made strained, awkward and urgent by his discomfort in using his second language and his deliberate rejection of fluency. Munro may have seen a parallel, as a native Gaelic speaker writing in English.

There is a paradox here worth noting. Munro criticised the superficial fluency of popular authors of his day and applauded the value of less commercial, more difficult or challenging writers. Yet in his own journalism, both in essays and stories, he maintained an accessible, fluent style and approachable characters. We shall see how this determined occupation of a reasonable "middle ground" led forward to his episodic fiction later in this thesis.

⁵⁰ Joseph Conrad, *The Portable Conrad* (London: Penguin, 2007), p.49

9. Genres

*No man exercised a more subtle literary influence on the West of Scotland than Neil Munro. His discriminating praise was sufficient to set aglow the heart of the young writer, for he instinctively sympathised with the aspiring. Indeed he loved all dreamers.*⁵¹

Neil Munro celebrated writers of every type and took a particular interest in those whom he considered risked doing something new, making what he called “a fresh start” in some aspect of literature. He considered that Kipling and Buchan, like Scott, had given the novel this fresh start, saving it from “external perdition”.⁵²

As noted previously, by the start of the twentieth century, the demand for literature, particularly fiction, in journals, magazines and books, had rocketed, resulting in two consequences in the supply of material. Firstly, books began to be seen as “ordinary commodities, sold at the drapers and with pounds of tea.”⁵³ John Buchan concurred and wrote in 1907,

accordingly, for almost the first time in the history of literature, we find books selling as freely and widely as, say, soap or bootlaces. There is no loss of dignity in the comparison. In a properly constituted community books are as much a necessity to all as tobacco, and are bought and sold in the same way.⁵⁴

Secondly, perhaps in response to this growing perception of undifferentiated goods, some authors maximised their chances of sales by co-ordinating the serialisation of novels with final publication of single-volume (rather than three part) novels. The most successful writers using this method included R.L. Stevenson, Rider Haggard and Arthur Conan Doyle. Waller notes that the book publication of Doyle’s story, *The Hound of the Baskervilles* in 1902 was timed just to precede the last instalment in the *Strand* Magazine and that

⁵¹ Neil Munro’s Obituary, *The Glasgow Herald*, 22nd December 1930

⁵² *Exploring New Roads*, p.230

⁵³ Frederick Greenwood, in *Blackwood’s Magazine* 1898, quoted in *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.61

⁵⁴ *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.61

generally, the serialisation of Doyle's stories yielded him four times the income that they provided in book form.⁵⁵ Munro passes on Robertson Nicoll's observation that Conan Doyle may have made an error in timing with his novel, *Uncle Bernac*:

Dr Robertson Nicoll has been observing that Dr Conan Doyle's latest book *Uncle Bernac* has come out uncommonly close on the heels of its immediate predecessor and he improves the occasion by a sensible discussion upon the follies of over production on the part of individual writers.⁵⁶

The book market was continuing to segment into various genres, each with leading writers who were able to thus differentiate their product, while placing it beside similar books to compete with other genres. Broad categories, such as "sensation" novels, soon burst into subspecies: adventure, thriller, detective, romantic, horror and fantasy fictions⁵⁷. These sub-categories were not new but they proved useful in categorising the books on offer for the reader.

Munro commented, usually positively, on a number of authors who were engaged in these identifiable genres, such as Bram Stoker and H.G. Wells, as well as writers who wrote across the categories, such as Rudyard Kipling. In addition, he rounded on writers such as John Buchan and James (B.V.) Thomson whom he felt had not fulfilled their potential or were flawed in their approach, in a particular niche.

Munro first mentions Bram Stoker in the context of him being Sir Henry Irving's manager (on 22nd October 1896). In reviewing *Dracula*, on 3rd June 1897, he states:

To make the young blood freeze, and each particular hair stand on end like quills upon the fretful porcupine, nothing published of late is quite so effective as Mr Bram Stoker's *Dracula*.

⁵⁵ *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.19 & p.649

⁵⁶ *Views and Reviews*, 3rd June 1897

⁵⁷ *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.667

He had a change of opinion on the offerings made by H.G. Wells, most obviously between *The Time Machine* and *The Island of Doctor Moreau*. On 21st November 1895, in relation to a review of the short story collection, *The Stolen Bacillus and other incidents*, he maintained that “*The Time Machine* suggested that Mr Wells was a genius and one story in this collection (*Davidson’s Eyes*) confirms it”. On 9th April 1896, he writes in his criticism of *The Island of Dr Moreau*:

Someone has called this a revolting book, apparently disgusted with its motif. [...] The story is worse than revolting – it is silly and it is painful to have to say so of any work by the man who wrote the incomparable “Time Machine”. There are two things even a Jules Verne must curb his imagination with – a respect of the limit of the reader’s credibility and a certain allowance for the novel reader’s stomach.

On 2nd December 1897, in *Views and Reviews*, he highlights some problems in the serialisation of *The War of the Worlds* and he counsels Wells to tackle the problems in the structure of the novel.

London will no doubt be relieved to find from the conclusion of H.G. Wells’ *War of the Worlds* that the triumph of the Martian invaders was only a temporary one [...] he (Mr Wells) has wisely decided to revise carefully and alter considerably before it is published in book form [...] Very often in the course of his new novel Mr Wells evades difficulty and it is to be hoped he will tackle those knotty periods more honestly in his revision.

On 16th September 1897, on reviewing *The Invisible Man*, he castigates the author for allowing himself to be distracted by the “pumping” or hyping of his work, writing “he is falling from grace due to his interviews and portraits and puff”.

Neil Munro rated Rudyard Kipling’s work, and the man himself, very highly and took great care in addressing both literary and personal issues in his columns. Kipling was a trend-setter and influencer, a role acknowledged, in respect of exotic journalism, by Munro on 9th April 1896:

Ever since one Kipling happened in a hot place called Lahore, India, writing diverse strange and fascinating histories in a newspaper, and reprinting them again in volumes for the edification of the whole earth (or as much of it as really matters) foreign newspapers of English persuasion have sought assiduously for the like talent.

On 5th November 1896, when considering his collection of poetry, *The Seven Seas*, Munro praises his technique and subject matter, even picking a favourite poem from the collection, (“McAndrew’s Hymn— a splendid study of an engineer”). He states,

Making poetry is the simplest thing in the world; it is the arrangement of the best words in the only order. He brings to all crude, struggling things sympathy and understanding; so the sailor at block and tackle, the fireman feeding his red-jawed monster, the horseman galloping, the soldier fighting, the sealer hunting, the pioneer with his feet to the fire in frontier bivouacs, make to Kipling’s mind the only stuff for poetry.

He is less impressed with Kipling’s attempts at novel writing and uses the author’s own words to bring him down to earth. On 18th March 1897 he writes,

Mr Rudyard Kipling modestly hopes he will be able, bye-and-bye, to write “a real novel” [...] and he adds that no man under 40 at the earliest has secreted enough observations – not to say thought – to do so.

Later the same year, on 28th October 1897, when reviewing *Captains Courageous*, he adds that the book,

impresses me as unfavourably in volume form as it did in Pearson’s Magazine. It is a clever book but it is not a great book. No man can write a really good novel before the age of 40. Mr Kipling has said so himself.

By 27th January 1898, he concedes that “Kipling is now the most fascinating literary personality in the English-speaking world and the most promising for future-glory...” He adds,

Mr Kipling, accepting the convention imposed by his material, has wrought it to triumphant issues. He has nearly all that goes to the equipment of a great master; he has romance, though it deals not with medieval persona in Wardour Street armour; he has the ears, eyes and nose for locality and all the tremendous differences that exact local colour implies, he has a great zest, in life in all its phases; he has the most precious and rare abhorrence of the hackneyed in character, sentiment and treatment.

However he concludes the piece with an important condition: “There is one thing missing from his equipment and that is reverence. It is the most serious deficiency a writer can have...” Munro must think that this flaw, this lack of reverence, is fatal and causes Kipling to fail in his work. In an earlier column, on 18th March 1897, he quoted J.M. Barrie who said that “Kipling’s defect was ignorance of life”. Munro added that if Kipling learned he could be taught much by grocers he might rise to be a great novelist. Munro’s regard for “reverence” is a question which will be revisited.

In considering John Buchan’s early work he plays the school teacher, the dominie. In later life they would become good friends with Buchan stating in his review of *The New Road*: “Mr Neil Munro is beyond question the foremost of living Scottish novelists, both in regard to the scope of his work and its rare quality”.⁵⁸ On 15th October 1897 Munro observes, “he has yet to give us the masterpiece but his *Scholar Gipsies* Arcady Librar must be reckoned a pretty high accomplishment”. On 25th February 1897, he ridicules any comparison between Stevenson and Buchan,

Every other essayist is “Stevenson’s legitimate successor”; that young man John Buchan, among others, has been called so very persistently (which is comical when you come to read Buchan), but the association of Stevenson and Le Gallienne is positively ludicrous.

In commenting on James (B.V.) Thomson’s criticism, Munro also draws attention to his deficits. On 30th April 1896, when reviewing his *Biographical & Critical Studies*, he makes these comments, not about Thomson’s writing but about his personality and character:

It contains some very striking work and displays great judgement. But Thomson, like all pessimists – he was the most hopeless of the lot – missed one-half the character of the men he wrote about.

⁵⁸ Neil Munro-*The Biography*, p.192

Later in the year, on 13th August 1896, he makes more negative criticisms:

They are not brilliant; they have none of the permanent value of some verse by the same writer, but they are interesting and suggestive as reflecting the theories of a narrow and evanescent, though once very menacing, school of literary criticism. James Thomson never had and never will have his vogue and yet there was good stuff in his prose and in his poetry. His one weakness was the want of that “heart” which Dr Robertson Nicoll insists upon as the supreme essential to popular success.

In rating these examples of a work, in a variety of genres, Neil Munro insists the technical and analytical skills be married onto a human response in, or to, the writing. He sees the presence of emotion and sentimentality as a strength, as integral to the nature of literature; he needs to find these features in the writer, to legitimise and explain the artist’s role in the art. This involvement, this submission, requires a personal commitment, the writer’s “heart” in the work. His comments on Thomson’s work are harsh although justified by his own confidence in his expertise.

Munro, in considering these authors, Doyle, Stoker, Wells, Kipling, Buchan, Thomson, makes clear his consistent and characteristic valorisation of respect for the reader, respect for the author’s engagement with difficulty and stylistic accomplishment. He values “reverence” and “heart”, two qualities that sustain him throughout his journalistic career.

10. The Kailyard: The Need for Balance

Kailyard fiction was a literary phenomenon at the end of the nineteenth century. Between 1888 and 1901 it dominated the best-seller lists in Britain; in the period 1891-97 Kailyard authors were ranked in the top ten in America.⁵⁹ The Kailyard, according to J.H. Millar, was made up of just three writers and epitomised by key texts: S.R. Crockett (*The Stickit Minister*, 1893), Ian Maclaren (aka the Rev John Watson) (*Beside the Bonnie Brier Bush*, 1894) and J.M. Barrie (*Auld Licht Idylls*, 1888 and *A Window in Thrums*, 1889)⁶⁰. However, the marketing expert behind the Kailyard success, at home and abroad, was W. Robertson Nicoll, a literary agent and reviewer who wielded massive influence in the literary world. He owned the *British Weekly*, a popular Christian publication, acted as an adviser to the publisher Hodder & Stoughton and had a habit of multiple reviewing under noms de plume in the various journals he edited.⁶¹

Kailyard fiction is made up of a combination of set elements. According to Shepherd it required an omniscient narrator, an episodic format, a rural setting, an imprecise chronology, a Free Church minister and/or a lonely schoolmaster, both frequently “stickit” or failed, with one or other usually assuming the narrator’s role.⁶² Campbell states that the Kailyard celebrated certain features of Scottish life with pride: family loyalty, the local boy who conquers poverty while his parents starve to make his progress possible, family strife, emigration and depopulation and the survival of pockets of strong agricultural

⁵⁹ Richard Zumkhawala-Cook, *Scotland as we know it; Representations in National Identity in Literature, Film and Popular Culture* (London: McFarland & Co, 2008), p.50

⁶⁰ *Kailyard and Scottish Literature*, p.12

⁶¹ *Writers, Readers and Reputations*, p.131

⁶² D Gifford (ed), *The History of Scottish Literature, Vol. 3* (Aberdeen: AUP, 1988), p.310

communities.⁶³ Munro frequently condemned the Kailyard writers, an action approved by Cunninghame Graham who wrote to him in December 1898 imploring:

I hope you are at work on something else, for it is a curse that Scotland should be judged on the demerits of those damned Kailyarders (ill put together lowland knowt) when we have such a writer as yourself amongst us.⁶⁴

In his criticism, Munro had different views of the three writers. In the main, he rated Barrie as a major force in literature, (perhaps seeing his potential to escape the genre), stating in his lecture, *The Modern Novel*, “The fresh start is more apparent in the work of Mr Barrie. “The Window in Thrums” and its successors are constructed with more art than the stories of John Galt”.⁶⁵ On 2nd January 1896, in considering the serialisation of *Sentimental Tommy* he notes that, “In the two or three years during which Barrie has been fallow he has been improving himself”. On 9th April he added, when the same piece was included in *Scribner’s* magazine:

a new Barrie has arisen, grander, more comprehensive (though not more comprehensible, I’ll warrant, for the hoi-polloi) and proving that the man from Thrums is the best literary artist in Scotland today.

Writing on the publication of the book, on 22nd October 1896, Munro comments on the novel’s improvement:

The book so thoroughly upsets all the judgements formed from reading it serially that henceforth I forswear all serials [...] except “St Ives” by Robert Louis Stevenson in the Pall Mall magazine).

But of *Sentimental Tommy* as a whole is there is no denying its masterly skill and informing genius.

⁶³ Ian Campbell, *Kailyard, A New Assessment* (Edinburgh: Ramsay Head, 1981), p.120

⁶⁴ Neil Munro-*The Biography*, p.88

⁶⁵ *Exploring New Roads*, p.231

However, as in many other cases, he was quick to condemn, using gossip to undermine “Barrie the personality” in a column on 10th December 1896 and also make a cutting remark about his account of his relationship with his mother (*Margaret Ogilvy*, 1896).

They say J. M. Barrie’s being spoiled by success – his guid conceit of himself, which was never small, is increasing.

He shouldn’t have written such a hasty biography of his mother.

Munro almost dismissed both Maclaren and Crockett as being close to incompetent. On 7th November 1895, when considering Maclaren’s book, *The Days of Auld Lang Syne*, he comments:

Maclaren doesn’t write in literary Scots – the Scots of the old makars, of Fergusson, Burns, Scott or Stevenson. He doesn’t write in any dialect of local Scots.

This grouping of Fergusson, Burns, Scott and Stevenson betrays his formal, literary influences, as discussed before. While h

reinforces their importance it also elevates the historical and literary relevance of the Scots language.

On 29th August 1895 he maintains that Maclaren mutilated Scots and he depended on Crockett (who in turn depended on Barrie). He expounds the view that the kailyard was parochial and on 10th January 1898 he makes the accusation that Maclaren was limited, intellectually and artistically, by his small-town mentality:

On the whole it is natural enough that “Ian Maclaren” should stick up for the small towns of Scotland as the cause of more civic pride than are the cities to such as belong thereto, for is he not a Kailyarder whose characters were drawn from the rural hamlet and the single burgh town? Ian Maclaren is confounding civic pride with native affection.

Munro seemed to reserve his harsher criticism for S.R. Crockett, with some of his comments now appearing quite juvenile and personal. On 20th February 1896 he notes that “Mr Crockett to all purposes was so obviously designed by nature to be a shop-walker that you are prejudiced against *The Raiders*”. When reviewing Crockett’s *Lad’s Love: an Idyll of the Lands of the Heather*, on 18th March 1897, he is very harsh and pointed, highlighting the lack of quality of Crockett’s work:

Mr Crockett never does any better “next time” – on the contrary, he seems to grow more careless with his work in every fresh volume. [...] It is pitiful to see really remarkable mechanical genius such as he undoubtedly has being exclusively used for the manufacture of sawdust-stuffed dolls for children.

Also, in a *Looker-On* column on food in literature on 4th February 1897, he makes humorous comments on Crockett and Barrie:

Mr Crockett [...] his Scots seem, like Robert Fergusson’s Scots, to live simply on kailbrose and porridge. Mr Barrie’s gastronomic allusions are quite as much to seek. What the people in “Thrums” live on, beyond tea, is impossible to say.

However much Munro expressed his disdain and disgust of the style, and probably success, of the Kailyard school of fiction, he mirrored many of its features in his own writing, especially the episodic fiction of *Para Handy*, *Jimmy Swan* and *Ermie*. His stories often featured a narrator, were of episodic format and revelled in their imprecise chronology. While *Para Handy* and *Jimmy Swan* often had a rural setting, Munro’s fiction revolved around journeys between the country and the city of Glasgow. The characters contained in *Ermie* considered the suburbs and the countryside unsophisticated, “in the sticks”, naming it “Deid Slow” or “Kamerhashinjoo”, really nowhere in particular.⁶⁶ Moira Burgess, in *Imagine a City*, makes the point that Neil Munro was not wholly free of Kailyard

⁶⁶ *Ermie, My Droll Friend*, p.565

sentimentality and at times, “he captures the very tone of the urban kailyard, couthy and contented, with an eye for the customs and curiosities of its own small world”.⁶⁷

Two of the main reactions against the Kailyard came from George Douglas Brown, in his novel *The House with the Green Shutters*, and John McDougall Hay, in his novel *Gillespie*. Munro was very supportive of Brown. They met in January 1902, just eight months before Brown’s death, when he visited Munro’s house in Waterfoot. Munro had hailed Brown as “the first of a new school of Scottish fiction where ‘realism’ was to be the specific note, and a welcome change from a surfeit of idyllic sentiment”.⁶⁸

On 30th October 1919, he had the opportunity to comment on Brown’s work and his reaction to Kailyard fiction when it was announced that a tablet was to be unveiled in an Ochiltree garden in memorial to Brown. This memorial was not welcomed by all; a report in the *Evening News* on 3rd November 1919 quotes Mr Andrew Stewart, an Ochiltree veteran:

Ochiltree is not Barbie, never was Barbie; Ochiltree is not squalid, never was squalid. Ochiltree and Barbie are not even second cousins.

To an extent it could be argued that Munro is also recanting his own position on this group of writers, taking the chance to modify his views:

It is clear enough that Brown did possess distinctive artistic ideals, that he considered that “kailyard” writers to be very far wrong artistically and that he was possessed by a particular hatred of one of the school – Ian MacLaren presumably. If then he produced *The House with the Green Shutters* by way of counterblast, he erred as greatly as the good Ian, but in the opposite direction. He outraged, in short, the basic artistic ideal.

And *The House with the Green Shutters* is not true. It is admittedly a powerful piece of writing; it does throw up those unpleasant traits of rural Scottish character that we know to

⁶⁷ Moira Burgess, *Imagine a City* (Glendaruel: Argyll Publishing, 1998), p.89

⁶⁸ Neil Munro, *The Looker On* (Glasgow: Kennedy and Boyd, 2009), p.280

exist; it does carry its premises to a logical conclusion. But its premises are false. It is untrue.

And, addressing the wrongs directed at two of the writers, he continues:

MacLaren and Crockett stressed, at least, the good that is in the Scots variety of humanity; Brown dragged before our eyes and nostrils the garbage of an exaggerated depravity.

His view is not too far different from Brown's own reassessment of his work in his letter to Ernst Baker in 1901, although he was less forgiving of the kailyard authors. Commenting on *The House with the Green Shutters* its author wrote:

'Tis a brutal and bloody work; too sinister, I should think, for a man of your kindlier disposition. There is too much black for the white in it. Even so it is more complimentary to Scotland, I think, than the sentimental slop of Barrie, and Crockett, and Maclaren. It was antagonism to their method that made me embitter the blackness; like old Gourlay I was going "to show the dogs what I thought of them." Which was a gross blunder, of course.⁶⁹

On 18th December 1919 Munro commented on the death of John McDougall Hay, stating,

He was for most of us a writer who had not yet arrived at perfect fruitfulness and we could not dare to strike out a phrase of judgement that would cover his work in the sombre *Gillespie* and the weaker but happier *Barnacles*.

Munro also advised that McDougall Hay's *Gillespie* should not be compared with Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* but with his earlier novel *Barnacles*.

In conclusion, Munro reacted against Kailyard fiction as it portrayed a nostalgic and parochial portrait of rural Scotland which was perceived as a representation of the whole, modern country. As Beth Dickson notes,

The hard facts of Scottish reality had been transformed into the matter of nostalgia and distinctive Scottish speech and custom were shown as quaint, old fashioned but most importantly, as something belonging to the past and therefore irrelevant to the modern world.⁷⁰

⁶⁹ *Kailyard, A New Assessment*, p.7

⁷⁰ *The History of Scottish Literature*, Vol.4, p.50

While he was associated with “positive negativism”⁷¹ and the recurring stripping away of excessive romanticism and sentimentalism of Scottish life and character, (with John Davidson and George Douglas Brown), his own journalism (especially in *The Looker-On*) and episodic fiction seems to undermine this position. George Blake, his journalistic executor, put Munro in the Kailyard group but considered that he “elevated the trick to a minor art”.⁷² Blake makes a fair point in that Munro was able to use the components of kailyard and weave together a situation which commented on the contemporary world. His articles and tales could be sentimental and couthy but their sentiments always seemed to be authentic and sincere, accurately portraying the characters. There may be an overlap or connection between Munro and both the Kailyard and anti-Kailyard writers but again Munro can be seen as occupying a middle-ground, consistently balanced, sustaining a reasonable tone.

⁷¹ *Scottish Literature*, p.703

⁷² *The Looker-On*, p.81

11. Celtic Gloom or Renaissance?

Delivering the Royal Town Planning Institute in Scotland's 2009 Sir Patrick Geddes Commemorative Lecture in May 2009, Murdo Macdonald, Professor of History of Scottish Art at the University of Dundee, listed Geddes's achievements:

He was a pioneering ecologist, an influential botanist, a highly-original theorist of cities, an advocate of the arts to everyday life, a committed community activist, a publisher and - of course – a founder of town planning.⁷³

However, it was in his role as the moving force of the Celtic Revival in Scotland that brought Geddes to Neil Munro's attention in the 1890s.

Geddes was inspired by the Irish Revival and the poetry of Yeats and through his magazine *The Evergreen* brought together a group of poets, novelists, painters and other thinkers in Edinburgh. This group included the poet "Fiona MacLeod" (that is William Sharp), the writers William Black and S. R. Crockett, the sculptor and playwright Pittendrigh Macgillivray, newspaper illustrator John Duncan and the artist E.A. Hornel. Gifford et al make the point that Geddes's movement "had a rural and retrospective orientation (and) had failed to embrace the Celt as part of modern society."⁷⁴ The magazine was essentially nostalgic, with an overtly romantic notion of exile and loss and a focus on spiritual, rather than practical, issues and so might seem largely irrelevant to the imminent twentieth century. However, it also heralded a change.

Munro was wary of the idea of a Scottish Renaissance (or Renascence as Geddes called it) and suspicious of the motives and competence in Gaelic of this Edinburgh group. Near the end of his career he wrote about Sir Patrick Geddes:

⁷³ Prof. Murdo Macdonald, *Patrick Geddes and the Scottish Generalist Tradition*, 20th May 2009

⁷⁴ *Scottish Literature*, p.325

A little over 30 years ago the Professor started *The New Evergreen*. There was none more grandiose than his ambitious idea of starting a Celtic Renaissance for Scotland with a handful of Edinburgh artists and a single poet who was mysteriously kept on the premises.⁷⁵

On 5th March 1896 he writes in *Views and Reviews*,

The Celtic revival in Edinburgh is engineered by people with no Celtic pedigree.

There is a Celtic revival of far more genuine interest than the Edinburgh one [...] it is to be found in the Highlands and, to some extent, in Glasgow and London.

On 21st May 1896 he adds,

More nonsense is being written just now about Celticism, the Celtic Renaissance and the Celtic gloom than one can find time to laugh at. Mr Quiller Couch and Mr Andrew Lang will have set themselves the task of showing how little logic there is in the crusade of Patrick Geddes and colleagues and I wish them joy of the task. They make take it from a Celt that 9/10ths of what has been labelled Celtic is neither in origin nor execution.

Munro understood the important role and apparent authority of Macpherson's *Ossian* in justifying the ideals and source of the Celtic Renaissance movement. On 15th October 1896, in reviewing a new edition of *The Work of Ossian* by Patrick Geddes and Colleagues he highlights the falseness of the original work and therefore undermines the legitimacy of Geddes.

Macpherson was of course a fraud and Dr Johnson was right, hitting upon the truth more by instinct than by reason. The best Gaelic scholars of today admit that while Macpherson indubitably got the suggestions for the characters and treatment of the poetry from existing sources, he invented the greater part of his alleged tradition and invented some of it very badly indeed.

The Evergreen magazine was the main means of distributing the group's ideas but it was short-lived, operating only in 1895 and 1896. Munro notes on 24th December 1896 that "The Evergreen is no more" and adds, "it was the organ of a cause – what cause I have never been able to discover, unless it was what the colleagues humorously think is the Celtic Renaissance."

⁷⁵ Neil Munro, *The Brave Days* (Glasgow: Kennedy & Boyd, 2009), p.293

The next month, on 28th January 1897, he makes a deliberate effort to totally disassociate himself from any relationship with the group, and more importantly, to distance himself from their ideas. In his article he uses the cloak of anonymity to refer to himself in the third person and speculate on his own views and opinions:

A paragraph on the editorial page of the News tonight (Wed) may [...] suggest that the author of "The Lost Pibroch" was one of the "legions" marching with the Evergreen trio mentioned. Mr Lang knows better, as he makes clear, and I am sufficiently in the confidence of Mr Neil Munro to be able to state that the Evergreen Theory of the Celt is quite beyond his comprehension; that he has never had the honour of intercourse with the inventors and projectors of that theory; and that if there is any marching to be done it will certainly not be under the banner of the Neo-Celts he will do it. But perhaps that is one of the things that really do not matter.

Munro's target had narrowed to "the Evergreen trio" or "the conquering legion" – Patrick Geddes, William Sharp and Fiona Macleod. However much he distrusted Geddes he did admire his professionalism, stating on 18th March 1897,

My very hearty dislike of Prof Patrick Geddes as a literary adviser, editor, Celtic pioneer and what not, does not prevent me from admiring very much the artistic and handsome manner in which he gets up the books published by his firm.

Although we now know that Fiona Macleod was the nom de plume of William Sharp, at the time Sharp insisted that he was not the female author. In fact, he wrote to Munro in both guises in March 1897. As MacLeod he wrote "I regret that the exigencies of my private life prevent me having the pleasure of asking you to call upon me."⁷⁶ As Sharp he wrote "[...] of course, too, there is not a shadow of truth in the rumour that William Sharp is Fiona MacLeod".⁷⁷ Munro had expressed reservations about MacLeod's authenticity as a Gaelic

⁷⁶ Hermann Völkel, *Das literarische Werk Neil Munros* (Frankfurt am Main: Peter Lang, 1994), p.181

⁷⁷ *Das Literarische Werk Neil Munro*, p.182

speaker and about her identity and indulged in what Lesley Lendrum calls a bout of “shadow flyting”.⁷⁸

On 7th November 1895, he writes about Fiona MacLeod,

She is original, honest to herself and her ideals and she often achieves the beautiful, but she harps too much on one key and her technique is defective.

The Gael Miss Macleod knows, in short, is the Gael who has been made by the Free Kirk.

She susurrs (sic) when she should be seeking a very simple vocabulary to give the English reader a correct idea of the primitive and simple beauty of the Gaelic tongue in which her characters and she herself ought to be supposed to speak.

On 12th March 1896 he speculates on her identity:

Who is Fiona Macleod?

1. A nom de plume
2. The daughter of the late Norman Macleod
3. The invalid cousin of William Sharp's wife, from the Hebrides
4. A protégé of Patrick Geddes.

Munro remained unconvinced by MacLeod's evocation of the Gaelic language and in November 1904, on the publication of Macleod's *The Winged Destiny* he issues this challenge in the News:

Well I am prepared to make a sporting offer; I am prepared to give a prize of ten pounds to the Gaelic Mod next year if Miss Fiona MacLeod can satisfy any three Gaelic-speaking Highlanders, hereinafter to be decided on, that she can carry on ten minutes' conversation in ordinary colloquial Gaelic, read half a page of Gaelic [...] or write correctly three submitted simple sentences in the language.⁷⁹

Neil Munro was suspicious of the Celtic Renaissance, of their motives and their lack of relevant qualifications. In protecting his Gaelic heritage he attacked their lack of Highland authenticity, their Edinburgh-based view of their past and their reliance on a mystical image

⁷⁸ Neil Munro-*The Biography*, p.62

⁷⁹ Neil Munro-*The Biography*, p.149

of Scotland. He was unconvinced by Geddes's ideas as much as he was unconvinced by Macleod's use and understanding of Gaelic tradition.

Part One: Conclusion

Munro's establishment of the newspaper columns, his championing of writers and his evaluation of the Kailyard and "Renaissance" writers ran concurrently with the writing of his series of major novels. His novel-writing ended as the Great War began, so the journalism examined suggests the co-ordinate points and practices of a man of letters, the foundation of his future writing. What followed would be articles, comments and criticism and episodic fiction as the effects of the War made him dissatisfied with the novel and made him realise that new forms were required.

While "Celtic Gloom" suggests nostalgia and "Renaissance" suggests regeneration and revised forms, Munro finds a path between the two concepts, valuing continuity above all else, carrying forward ideals, traditions and principles from the past into the twentieth-century.

Part Two: Transition – Before and after the Great War

12. After the Great War: Looking for Something New

The Great War had a profound effect on Munro. His son Hugh, a captain in the Argyll & Sutherland Regiment, died in action in the field at Aveluy in September 1914, trying to remove a booby-trapped German flag from the German wire. In the same month he went to Paris and Versailles, visiting hospitals to talk to the wounded from the battlefield at Ypres. By November he had been “politely but firmly deported by His Majesty’s Army” as there was a danger of “seeing too much of the present state of affairs”.⁸⁰ Munro wanted to be a Scottish eye-witness for the troops, reporting on the deeds of the Scottish regiments and following a Foreign Office request he returned to France for three weeks in the winter of 1917 and again in the spring of 1918.⁸¹ However, due to strict censorship no articles were published. In the latter part of the War, from the summer of 1917, he was on the brink of nervous collapse.

Both of Munro’s feature columns all but ceased (apart from some *Erchie* and *Para Handy* stories) during the war years as all publications experienced paper rationing. Also, he took up a senior managerial role with the newspaper’s Board for a period, working between Glasgow and London.

The *Views and Reviews* column restarted on 19th June 1919 and Munro seemed to be obsessed with trying to find literature which had been formed by the experience of the

⁸⁰ *Neil Munro-The Biography*, p200

⁸¹ Per correspondence to GW Blackwood, 23rd March 1916, *Das Literarische Werk Neil Munro*, p.260

Great War. He was realistic enough to know that such literature could not be commercial, writing on 14th August 1919:

Publishers freely admit that they will have nothing to do with fiction inspired by the War. The public will not buy what might arouse the old anxiety and bleakness.

In the same column he states that the new literature needed to be written by new, and as yet, undiscovered authors,

Conrad, Wells, Walpole and the rest are made men and can hardly experience the rebirth of inspiration that will be necessary for the presentation of the new circumstances.

Above all, he seeks literature which is new, developed and different from past works without being able, or willing, to define what he means. Munro proposes that society has been changed by the war and its inability to cope is similar to a nervous complaint he calls “neurasthenia”. This condition was described at the time as,

a multitude of obscure nervous affections of the most varied and opposing characters, to the great confusion of exact diagnosis and of scientific treatment.

or

a psychosis or morbid condition of the cerebral nervous system [...] which, though not acute or severe enough to constitute insanity, shows a definite kinship to insanity.⁸²

On 6th November 1919, in *Views and Reviews*, he says “let us first agree that the world is suffering from post-war neurasthenia”. Munro takes the view that art represents the world around it:

Standards and values and ideals are all adrift: and literature is a reflection of the world’s thought. Literature cannot escape infection. Just as dancing today runs to seed in Jazz, as journalism runs to sensation and the stunt, as politics runs to wrangling, as religious

⁸² From “One hundred years ago - Neurasthenia”, <http://bjp.rcpsych.org/cgi/content/full/184/6/545>, accessed 3rd November 2009.

speculation to spooks, as finance to premium bonds, as electioneering to hooliganism – so does literature share the neurotic tendencies of the moment [...] It will pass, and out of it there may conceivably emerge a saner and healthier literature.

In *Views and Reviews* on 18th March 1920 he again metaphorically describes the state of health of the modern artist:

War does not seem to stimulate, immediately at least, great art. Our artists are like small boys after a party – suffering from a cerebral congestion that cannot be relieved.

It is perhaps too easy to draw the conclusion that Munro's diagnosis of the state of literature is connected to, and in some way, reflects his own mental and physical health. He does see some imbalance, some fault with the traditional model and, as noted below, he looks for something to emerge from the experience of war and redefine some aspects of literature. However, he also uses the term "neurasthenia" in a more trivial way.

On 8th April 1920 he considers the novels, and films based on the novels, of Edgar Rice Burroughs. He pigeon-holes Burroughs so: "As a literary man, he simply does not exist. As a writer of film scenarios, however, he is above criticism. He writes directly for the cinema". Munro describes the current literary scene as "this Tarzan phase of post-war neurasthenia". Also, a column the previous month, on 8th March 1920 again refers to this medical condition:

Neurasthenia is a condition under which the sufferer is prone to collapse into black moods, in which he or she labours under a sense of futility of life, or a sense of his or her incapacity to fight the battle of life?

And:

we do not have simple headaches nowadays; we have functional disturbances of the nervous system, vasomotor and otherwise [...] All of which indicates a fault somewhere. Either our bodies are weak or modern life asks too much of us. The latter explanation is probably exact.

This particular column is unusual in that it is credited to “Vagabond”, one of the few articles to be attributed to an actual journalist. Lesley Lendrum, Neil Munro’s biographer, has assured this writer that it was not written by Munro but by his colleague Norman Bruce, suggesting that the use of the “neurasthenia” metaphor may have been in vogue at the time. As Bradbury and McFarlane point out, the adoption of scientific and medical metaphors was a feature of modernist writing and came into vogue as it became the literature of technology, of a worldwide crisis in identity.⁸³

Munro was convinced that the Great War would produce changes in literature or at least changes in approach, style or methodology. On 25th March 1920, he insists that “the War would produce something great”. On 6th May 1920 he writes:

Up until now the war has produced not a single book, although I can recall half a dozen opuscles in poetry.

A week later, in responding to an article by Sir Philip Gibbs, who had served as one of five official British reporters during the First World War, he makes the following comments:

Personally I am inclined to believe that the novel will change its form radically and that the old conventions of novel writing will disappear.

And:

There is growing up – it is here already – a reading public hungry for new authors, with new methods of technique, a knowledge of the new world of ideas and a new outlook upon the problems of life.

And:

The war has turned the eyes of people inwards, and we can only expect an outburst of soul searching by the young men with bulging foreheads and a certain anxiety to read the records of the results on the part of others

⁸³ Bradbury and McFarlane (ed), *Modernism, A Guide to European Literature 1890-1930* (London: Penguin, 1991), p.27

Again, a week later, he concluded his examination of this theme but with a bitter twist, perhaps reflecting his own sense of loss, perhaps reflecting public opinion:

The War has still to occasion a literary revival [...] we still await that revival, forgetting the ones best fitted to bring it about will write no more.

Neil Munro's literary focus from this point on was on his journalism. He did not publish a novel after *The New Road* in 1914. As demonstrated, he was sensitive to the need for a new artistic form, far different from his own romantic style and the work of his peers, and was seeking new writers to make the required alterations. However, his journalism and episodic fiction could continue to react to and comment on current events without radical literary challenge, a consistent, comfortable, measured response to a changing world, sitting alongside the news reports.

13. Gypsies

Neil Munro often took the opportunity to review and revise his opinions on issues and events, covering similar ground over a period of time. One particular topic which seems to demonstrate his comfort in nostalgia, his regret for a changing world and his distrust and suspicion of authority was Scotland's gypsies, in particular the lot of gypsy children. Two articles, written twenty-three years apart demonstrate his commitment to them.

The first article, "A Blue Book" was published on 13th February 1896 and arose from his consideration of *A Government Enquiry into Gipsy or Tinker Children in Scotland* completed by William Mitchell (Vice Chairman of the Glasgow School Board) and the Rev. John McCallum (of Ardenaig, Loch Tay). The style of the column is factual and straightforward and Munro attacks the authors' conclusion:

I find their ardent desire is to extirpate the Scottish gipsy root and branch. Move them into houses and civilise them.

However he accepts that they are trying to adopt a principled and moral stand and that the behaviour of the gypsy, the tinker, does not help.

Their desire springs from the purest motive – from an honest belief that the tinker is a wretched and miserable creature in his present condition and that it should be a good Christian's duty to lead him to a way of living more comfortable for himself. But, the tinker [...] is nobody's enemy but his own.

The proposal to make camping out illegal is tyrannical!

The second column, "Children of the Road", was printed on 28th July 1919 and it considered the implications of the Education Act on gypsy children. Whereas the first article was written in a straightforward manner, this column seems to be almost biographical and at first describes the arrival of a gypsy family:

The tinkers are with us now. In the old quarry beyond the manse they have stretched their whale backed tents and lit their fires. Ragged children are on that part of the road continually, and at night rough men, not always sober, straggle about the fields and lanes. The women are at our door several times a day [...] They stay with us for a fortnight then go mysteriously.

This description is realistic and not in any way romantic. He portrays these people as rough and ragged, not heroic, not idealised. While he would like to see them as free spirits, burdened by the controlling hand of the state, out of step with modern life, in reality they are beginning to be incorporated into institutions (such as the armed forces), influenced by “lowland ways” and adopting new technology (a gramophone recording of Tosti’s “Parted” plays in the campsite).

The Education Act chained them to the earth. Its provisions demanded that the wandering folks should bide over the winter in towns that their children may have schooling.

In the end, society’s demand for education over-rules the travellers’ culture, as:

Civilisation gains territory by sacrificing the picturesque. Twenty years hence the tinkers may only be a memory for the old ones among us.

Although Munro’s second account may be entirely fictional it presents an effective case in the defence of the gypsies’ right to roam. His views have not really changed over this substantial gap in time, only his approach. Overall, he recognises the validity of the basic values of the outsiders, however much they might rankle the local, respectable community, and seems to view education as an unwelcome and entrapping civilising force, homogenising cultural differences, smoothing over uncomfortable differences in work, ownership of property, hygiene and childcare. Education threatens the authenticity, or Munro’s view of authenticity, of the gypsy life, assimilating it into regular society.

This recognition of the value and validity of the outsider chimes with his own experience as a Gael in an anglicized Scotland, as an illegitimate child, and as a literary man sensing that the pre-Great War era was changing his notion of innocence forever.

14. The Visual Arts

As noted previously, Neil Munro had an eclectic range of artistic interests and many contacts throughout the arts community in Glasgow and around Scotland. He seemed to be particularly interested in painting, architecture and design and championed local practitioners in his newspaper columns.

On 26th December 1895, he applied his general approach to criticism specifically to art, placing the reviewer's opinions in the middle of any evaluation of the worth of a work, stating, "A New Criticism of Art is based on expressions of temperament, not discussion on the make up of a picture or piece of art". While valuing the place and role of art criticism he was realistic enough to appreciate that it had little priority in commanding newspaper resources, writing on 13th August 1896, "Art criticism in the provinces is not worth the name; it is a duty relegated to reporters who graduate from the Police Office to the picture gallery by a sublime law of newspaper life." Later in life, he gave his views on his own portrait:

In November 1903, the late William Strang, merely for love and practice, limned my portrait at one sitting – a Holbeinesque chalk drawing of two colours. It is now in the National Portrait gallery in Edinburgh. Don't rush to see it!⁸⁴

As with literature, Munro was suspicious of fads and fashion and on 25th November 1897 he records his views on what he called the "New Movement", the predecessor to the art nouveau style later utilised by Charles Rennie Mackintosh, which had originated in Austria before spreading to Germany, France, Britain and the United States of America. He felt this movement was a young person's excuse to dabble in decadent ideas:

⁸⁴ *The Brave Days*, p.255

The newest New Movement of the School of Art Club is mainly confining itself to the decoration of life [...] It is going to fill spaces in the handsomest manner possible, reform the poster, make mural ornament get up on its hind legs and squeal, furnish you with chairs that it would be sacrilege to sit on far less put your boots upon.

[...] "pretty" is the one vice that the New Movement abhors [...] it is rather the ugly side of life and nature that the Movement prefers to study. Decadent is the common term we apply to those artistic preferences for the morbid and contorted but it is significant that decadence in every art in Europe is a young man's quality. It disappears long before one has come to forty years but it is rarely found among the possessions of the weakling and the fool.

He was an untiring supporter of the Glasgow Boys. This group of Scottish artists, (including James Guthrie, E.A. Hornel, Arthur Melville, Macaulay Stevenson and George Henry) had been active since the early 1880s, working to a joint agenda of sorts, publicising and publishing their aims and views. By the late 1890s members of the group had exhibited in London, Munich, Barcelona, St Louis, Pittsburgh and St Petersburg. On 10th October 1895 Munro comments on a recent exhibition in Liverpool:

the struggling after primitive expression which distinguishes George Henry's "Galloway Landscape", James Guthrie's "Geese"⁸⁵ and a rhapsody of Edward Hornel's I saw the other day in a Liverpool gallery.

the most extraordinary pictures with madcap modernity, utter contempt for tradition and rule which is only justifiable and hopeful because it may yet lead to release from the fetters of custom.

A month later, on 14th November 1895, he notes their reception in St Louis,

I have not seen a single adverse criticism of the 115 pictures which the Glasgow men have sent to the West. The American appreciation is based on sound judgement and a clearer understanding of what the artists are driving at than seems to be possessed by the average British critic. The Glasgow School are schooled in the science of life and in the moods of nature and of the human mind and soul.

Munro seems to have no difficulty in presenting two separate and opposite assessments of the Boys' works, on one hand praising their primitiveness and modernity and on the other their scientific and logical basis. He is entranced by their portrayal of Scottish rural life and

⁸⁵ "Geese" is probably "To Pastures New", 1882-3

ordinary people at work, where labour becomes the subject of art. He also approved of their artistic ideals, techniques and methodology and their direct engagement with the subject “en plein air”. Their combination of the ordinary and the artistic, the parochial and abstract, had a commonality with Munro’s own approach to journalism and resulted in the same conflict: how relevant is an interpretation and representation of the sentimental subject, of the rural idyll, in modern Scotland?

By 23rd August 1897, Munro was bemoaning that the artists are leaving Glasgow to pastures new, skulking away in the night. In fact, by this time, the group had all but shattered, with the individual members working in isolation.

There is an exodus of our artists to London; E.A. Walton went a few years ago, Mr Lavery has virtually taken up abode there, Mr Guthrie is leaving in a month or two and George Henry also hints at going

[...] Bye-and bye, I expect we shall have Mr Paterson and Mr Gauld and Mr Macaulay Stevenson and all the rest of them folding their tents like the Arabs and as silently stealing away.

On 17th January 1898 in *the Looker-On* column, Munro produces a parody of a “Glasgow Boy”, when our unnamed narrator meets “Megilpeson” preparing a work on “Sending-In Day”. The article gently mocks both the subject matter and style of the Glasgow Boys as well as their predecessors, “the Gluepots”.

I met Megilpeson this morning tearing down Bath St in a tremendous hurry, with the wild and unaccustomed gleam of important business in his eye. “My dear boy” said he” I’m not going to talk to you for more than a minute; sending in day, you know, was on Saturday and here I am with that big pastoral piece of mine unframed.

[...] “There ought to be a big gallery in the new place in Kelvingrove, when it is opened, where there would be a large and really representative collection of works by the Glasgow boys exclusively. It’s all one to me, of course. Art is not the appreciation of corporations and Academies; still don’t you think my ‘Caliban upon Setibos’ or my ‘Eurydice’ or my ‘Hen farm near Kildrum’ would look well in a permanent collection? [...] wait till the opening next month and you’ll hear nothing spoken of but the latest Lavery, and Millie Dow’s moral, nude figgers or D.Y. Cameron’s portrait of a lawyer.”

“Old Gamboge⁸⁶ always sells well; you find his works in the homes of self-made men who ‘buy what they like sir; and what they don’t like they don’t buy, and they can not understand those pink meadows and purple cows;’⁸⁷ and after all that is perhaps the best way to buy pictures”.

On 4th June 1903 he writes to Hornel, saying “Many thanks for your kind invitation to Kirkcudbright [...] I’ll give you a warning that you’re a very throng man and throng to a good purpose; in your Kirkcudbright fastness you seem to me to be the sanest man painting in Scotland today.”

Writing later, perhaps on reflection, Munro seems to have contradictory views on Hornel’s work. He recollects an episode, in 1889 or 1890, when an art critic told him of his visit to George Henry and Edward Hornel’s studio to see “The Druids”. Munro states, “none of his time-honoured clichés could be adapted. Mysterious stuff! Careless draughtsmanship! No sensible story! No finish! And gobs of gold leaf!”⁸⁸ He also writes that “‘The Druids’ was not information of any kind but sumptuous decoration, only an ebauche (that is, a blank or outline) of the vision, inspired by the hymns of freedom. No real kick in it. Fiona MacLeodish in its Celticism”.⁸⁹ However he also adds, “I used to think that Edward Hornel made his pictures far too large and a little too monotonous in theme for popularity. Seeing it again after thirty years I abase myself and admit I was mistaken [...] Hornel was painting for posterity.”⁹⁰

As Philip Long notes, the Glasgow Boys were massively influenced by James McNeil Whistler and his approach to art, following his adage that an artist should be free to select his own

⁸⁶ As late as 1898, Gamboge was sometimes used as a pigment by oil-painters.

⁸⁷ Perhaps a reference to “A Galloway Landscape by George Henry”, The Glasgow Boys, p215

⁸⁸ *The Brave Days*, p234

⁸⁹ *The Brave Days*, p268

⁹⁰ *The Brave Days*, p267

subject and see beauty wherever he chooses.⁹¹ Billcliffe states that “Whistler’s tonal harmonies, his feeling for the decorative aspects of composition and his radical approach to the “mise-en-scene” of his pictures within the frame of the canvas, his open acknowledgement of the development in French painting [...] made him a demi-god in the eyes of the Boys”.⁹² Whistler was well known in Glasgow, having exhibited there in a variety of locations, including the 1888 Glasgow International Exhibition. His portrait of Thomas Carlyle, *Arrangement in Grey and Black No. 2*, was included in the Exhibition and purchased by Glasgow Corporation in 1891 for 1,000 guineas, on the Glasgow Boys’ insistence.

Munro acknowledged Whistler’s use of the lithograph on 17th January 1898, writing,

Whistler is the master of lithography – the use of tracing paper and stone is not a fad. If you come across any lithographs by Whistler, Hartley, T.R. Way, Macbeth or George Thomson, don’t throw them away because some people call them “process” and a fad.

Later he recalled the availability of his work, and is perhaps a bit more realistic in his own assessment of their worth:

What the value of Whistler’s best pictures are now, one can only guess [...] but there was a time about five and thirty years ago when I could have had my pick of at least half a dozen of the most renowned of them in the back shop of a picture dealer’s premises in Glasgow at an average cost of about £600 to £700. I knew them well, and to tell the truth, I did not think very much of them.⁹³

In 1889, the *Baillie* magazine recorded the impact of a new development in the social framework of the city:

⁹¹ Philip Long, *The Scottish Colourists, 1906-1930* (Edinburgh: National Galleries of Scotland, 2000), p.16

⁹² Roger Billcliffe, *The Glasgow Boys* (London: Frances Lincoln, 2008), p.31

⁹³ *The Brave Days*, p.244

The Tea Room is among the newer features of Glasgow life. Not so long ago there was nowhere for those who desired refreshment beyond the bar of the public house and the parlour of the restaurant.

Munro had acknowledged the fashionability of the Tea Rooms at the time, most memorably in an episode of *Erichie* (i.e. “Erichie in an Art Tea Room”, 1904) where Erchie and Duffy visit the Room de Luxe in Catherine Cranston’s newly opened Willow Tearoom in Sauchiehall Street, and this is discussed later. He recounted later her importance in promoting the work of the Glasgow Boys and Mackintosh, writing,

She (Miss Cranston) mapped out a career for herself and became pioneer in a lunch-tea-room movement which in a few years made her name a household word. By general consent it was associated with the ideas and triumphs of the “Glasgow School” of artists, then entering international fame. At the International Exhibition of 1901 in Kelvingrove her Team House and Tea Terrace had architectural and decorative innovations which created a sensation even among continental visitors⁹⁴

And

Miss Cranston brought to light the genius of Glasgow architect, Charles Mackintosh, who died early in recent years and was the inspiring influence of a group of Glasgow artists, men and women, who made the tearooms homogenous in structure, decoration and furnishing.⁹⁵

In a light-hearted article in the *Looker-On* on 22nd December 1919, Munro sends up the artistic endeavours of Cranston and Mackintosh,

For the first Christmas and New Year since 1913/14 most of the more exclusively national products of Scottish Art will be found restored to their pre-war perfection [...] the currant bun, for instance, has come back (according to rumours around the Western Club and the Glasgow Presbytery).

[...] Miss Cranston declares that, had she anticipated a renaissance of the currant bun, she would never have given up her delightful tearoom business [...] just before the War began (she) had got plans submitted by Mr Mackintosh, the artist, for a new bun “format” in which the paste casing, instead of being a simple parallelogram would take a rococo or Byzantine shape, with decorations either in the Celtic or Munich manner.

⁹⁴ *The Brave Days*, p.197

⁹⁵ *The Brave Days*, p.198

This good humour seems entirely characteristic of the episodic fiction, where the shrewd and satiric perspectives of the characters also register qualities of sympathy and appreciation. Even here, in his evolving ideas of Scottish art, Munro was finding a middle way through.

15. The Domestication of Science

“It’s a great highjinckie age”, said Erchie⁹⁶

At the start of the twentieth century, Glasgow had grown to a population of 762,000 (in 1901), a rise of approximately 650,000 in a century. The move to the cities had been dramatic. In 1800, 17% of Scotland’s people lived in the towns and cities of more than a 10,000 population; by 1910 this figure had risen to 50%. Scotland was one of the most industrialised areas of the world.⁹⁷ As noted by historian Michael Lynch, six Scots had made the league table of the top forty nineteenth-century British multi-millionaires, including the ironfounder William Baird, the Paisley sewing-thread magnates Peter and James Coats and Charles Tennant, owner of the huge St. Rollox chemical works.⁹⁸ Glasgow had taken a lead in the municipalisation of services, engaging in large scale plans to install and upgrade a technological infrastructure in the city, firstly with the gas supply in 1867, telephones in 1890, electricity in 1891 and the tram system in 1894.⁹⁹

As Lesley Lendrum notes: “Neil Munro had the good fortune to be recording the life of a city at its Victorian apogee: Glasgow was now Britain’s second city and the Empire’s”.¹⁰⁰ In his columns and episodic fiction he commented on industry and new technologies, in both jocular and serious terms.

On 17th October 1895, he was intrigued by an early theory on cloning, put forward by Arthur Conan Doyle that, “[...] every cell in the dermoid cyst has the power latent in it by which it

⁹⁶ Erchie, p.427

⁹⁷ *Scotland, A New History*, p.411-2

⁹⁸ *Scotland, A New History*, p.406

⁹⁹ T.M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation 1700-2007* (London: Penguin 2006), p.339

¹⁰⁰ *Neil Munro – The Biography*, p.50

may reproduce the whole individual.” On 29th April 1897, when examining the changes in war reporting, he notes,

No war ever fought in the history of the world has ever been more promptly described than the gentlemen of Fleet Street are describing the Greco-Turkish war [...] it is due to the telegraph offices on either side of the conflict.

In a *Views and Reviews* column on 20th May 1897, Munro takes the opportunity when reviewing Robert Sherard’s *The White Slaves of England*, a collection of newspapers articles about working conditions and urban poverty, to attack the industrialists of Glasgow.¹⁰¹

It’s a pity that when he was on the series he did not come north to St. Rollox or Rutherglen, where Sir Charles Tennant and Lord Overton made their millions by manufacturers that demand more victims than moloch.

In fiction, a disparaging comment is made by Erchie on the smell from the St Rollox Chemical works, “There’s naething beats the fresh air if it’s no blawin’ fae Tennant’s chimney”.¹⁰²

In a *Looker-On* column on 23rd August 1897 he refers to a statement made by Dr Gustav Jaeger that “the starting point of all organic life upon our planet was an aqueous solution of ammonia carbonate”. Dr Jaeger had achieved fame through the promotion of his 'scientific' theories about the use of hygienic dress and of wearing wool next to the body (the Sanitary Woollen System) and Munro referred to him as “the semmit man who was a great scientist to boot”.¹⁰³

On 15th December 1919, in a *Looker-On* column, he compares serious scientific reports about the end of the world with the reception of similar news in the St Andrews Hall during a revival meeting.

¹⁰¹ <http://www.spartacus.schoolnet.co.uk/PHsherard.htm>, accessed 13th May 2010

¹⁰² *Erchie*, p.344

¹⁰³ http://www.fashion-era.com/rational_dress.htm, accessed 13th May 2010

On 17th December, an American Professor casually reported, there will be an unusual conjunction of the planets, involving frightful storms and earthquakes on this Earth and possibly its complete destruction. [...] The late Reverend Baxter of the Christian Herald used to be the same with his audience in the St Andrew's Hall. He came cheerily forward with a new date at each of his Glasgow lectures and curiously enough, the kind people who made up his St Andrew's Hall audience never lost faith in him, or ceased to shudder.

He goes on to discuss the relative publicity of scientific discoveries, complex and spurious, serious and humorous:

The village I write from has no idea that Einstein has found space twisted and Professor (Arthur) Eddington has found a difference between crooked and straight light, but will soon hear about a Leigh window-cleaner, Mr Dickinson, whose throat can simultaneously produce a tenor and bass and a live Brontosaurus found in the Congo.

Professor Eddington had provided the first confirmation of Einstein's theory that gravity will bend the path of light when it passes near a massive star (and condensed his views in a parody of the *Rubaiyat* of Omar Khayyam),

Oh leave the Wise our measures to collate,
One thing at least is certain, light has weight
One thing is certain and the rest debate
Light rays, when near the Sun, do not go straight.¹⁰⁴

On 19th January 1920, he features Marconi's latest developments in telephony in his column:

the public seem to be rather indifferent regarding the latest genuine achievements of Marconi in the field of wireless communication. Generally speaking it has not yet realised that Marconi is now off the wireless telegraph and on to the wireless telephone, and beyond that into a region neither telegraphic nor telephonic [...] A fortnight ago wireless telephonic speech was established, for the first time, between Ireland and Canada.

He then expounds on the consequences of this development, outlining how it will change communication on a global basis, reaching into every part of public and commercial life.

There will be no escape from Voices [...] At every day's halt in the journey the explorer will, in his voice, recount his progress to the newspaper office of all civilisation. Melba will sing – not to a single audience of 3000 in an opera house but simultaneously to myriads of musical enthusiasts in every part of the world. Lloyd George [...] will be tapped by politicians in

¹⁰⁴ <http://www-history.mcs.st-and.ac.uk/Biographies/Eddington.html>, accessed 13th May 2010

Brazil. Ships, yachts, trains, aeroplanes, motor cars will all very soon have wireless telephony [...] it will operate lighthouses, beacons and public clocks.

As noted previously, Munro was capable of surreal leaps in the details of his episodic fiction and one included the “adoption” of Marconi as an Italian-Glaswegian cafe proprietor.

See at thon chap Marconi that used to ha’e the original ice-cream saloon in Garscube Road noo makin’ his thousands oot o’ telegraphin’ without ony wires.¹⁰⁵

Munro included details of technology in many of his stories. One of the most touching is the *Para Handy* tale, “Intercourse with the Infinite”, when MacPhail’s son helps to put a primitive radio set on the puffer, arousing the suspicions of the Skipper and Mate. However, the engineer is entranced by the possibilities of the radio:

Macphail paid no attention, but stuck a headphone over his ears, and assumed an intently listening aspect [...] Science! [...] The newest marvel of human discovery! [...] All made by Johnny from workshop scrap.¹⁰⁶

Munro fully uses the opportunity to exaggerate the effects and extent of new inventions and improvements in technology, particularly through Erchie, who is prone to making profound statements on a day-to-day basis.

There’s a couple o’ men ca’d Wright in America been workin’ for years ay an airyplane that was said to be so complete and bird-like in its motions it could dae onything a bird could dae except lae eggs.¹⁰⁷

And:

“I’ll bate ye that chap Edison’s thrang thinkin’ o’ a combination o’ the phonygraph, the kinematygraph, the sewing machine, the vacuum cleaner, the thermos flask and incubator that’ll relieve women o’ their domestic bonds.”¹⁰⁸

As always, Munro was also personally engaged with some of the main figures in this field.

On 8th November 1926 he wrote to Sir John Richmond asking for his opinion on whether he

¹⁰⁵ *Erchie*, p.187

¹⁰⁶ *Para Handy*, p.398

¹⁰⁷ *Erchie*, p.333

¹⁰⁸ *Erchie*, p.427

(and perhaps Lord Weir) should get involved in investing in the development of John Logie Baird's television system:

It would make me unhappy for life if I withheld from you this opportunity of conferring a scientific boon on the world which wants only the television now to be perfectly happy, and, incidentally, of making a little extra pocket money.¹⁰⁹

However, a later letter, dated 20th June 1927 changed this advice.

Take it from me that the whole future lies with Gramophones, buy that stock in large blocks, and wait for a year or two. Tip regarding Television hereby deleted.¹¹⁰

Munro maintains a paradoxical position through his writing, demonstrating his personal excitement in speculating on the prospects of technological change in his columns while making his characters express a much more cautious and pessimistic set of responses in their engagement with the future, perhaps more in line with the worries and apprehensions of the man in the street. Erchie and Macphail confront change, and try to cope with uncertainty, with comedy and pathos; Munro uses the same tools but does not try to limit his horizons. He looks forward with optimism but rationalises progress to match his nostalgic approach to art and literature. In his fiction, satiric comedy allows him to keep a dignified distance, but it also opens up the possibility of his, and his readers', engagement with the technological developments of modernity. Munro should therefore be considered as a writer not in retreat from modernity, nor committed to reactionary conservatism or backward-looking nostalgia, but rather as a writer entering the modern world willingly but sceptically. He had an optimistic curiosity and an ironic intelligence firmly based on deep and broad nineteenth-century foundations and perhaps this security of approach led to his dissociation from C.M. Grieve, the icon of Scottish literary modernity.

¹⁰⁹ *Das Literarische Werk Neil Munro*, p.292

¹¹⁰ *Das Literarische Werk Neil Munro*, p.295

16. Grieve and Munro

Throughout his career as a literary critic Neil Munro was supportive to new and imaginative Scottish writers, regardless of their style of writing, genre or approach. A tribute to this facet of this work was recorded in his obituary in *The Glasgow Herald*.¹¹¹

No man exercised a more subtle literary influence on the West of Scotland than Neil Munro. His discriminating praise was sufficient to set aglow the heart of the young writer, for he instinctively sympathised with the aspiring. Indeed he loved all dreamers.

However, as noted previously, he could be suspicious of artistic causes and national movements, especially when their ideals and philosophies did not tally with his own. This was well illustrated in his comments on, and correspondence with, William Sharp and Patrick Geddes regarding their ideas for the Celtic “Renaissance” in the late 1890s. At that time, Munro was confident about his opinions in the series of exchanges, writing with vigour in the *Views and Reviews* columns, recruiting colleagues to challenge the new perspective of Scottish arts and literature emanating from Edinburgh. This confidence was less evident in his encounters with C.M. Grieve. At first Grieve lauded him as part of the Scottish Literary Renaissance, and published him in the first of the three anthologies of *Northern Numbers* in 1920, but later criticised and discounted Munro’s work in *The Scottish Educational Journal* in 1925.

In 1920, C.M. Grieve published *Northern Numbers*, a compilation of the work of eleven contemporary Scottish poets. The volume was dedicated “with affection and pride to Neil Munro” and the contributors were John Buchan, Violet Jacob, Neil Munro, Will Ogilvie, T.S. Cairncross, Joseph Lee, John Ferguson, A.G. Grieve, Donald Mackenzie, Roderick Watson Kerr, and C.M. Grieve himself. Some of this group of Scottish writers, along with Lewis

¹¹¹ *That Vital Spark*, p.3

Grassic Gibbon, George Douglas Brown and Fionn Mac Colla, were committed, before, during and after this time, to addressing themselves seriously, first and principally to Scottish readers and not just incidentally, as had their predecessors in Kailyard writing.¹¹² As Gifford et al confirm, at this stage in his career Grieve / MacDiarmid was prepared to pay tribute to his elder contemporaries although he later distanced himself from many of those who had helped him.¹¹³

The *Views and Reviews* column of 23rd December 1920 considered the publication of *Northern Numbers, Being Representative Selections from Certain Living Scottish Poets*. Osbourne and Armstrong suggest, in *That Vital Spark*, that Munro himself wrote the column, “writing from the very thinly-veiled anonymity of his unattributed column.”¹¹⁴

Lesley Lendrum, Munro’s biographer takes another view:

Who wrote this unsigned piece in “Views and Reviews”? I am pretty certain it did not come from Neil’s pen. I cannot think that he would have written of his own poems in those terms, and I also find that the style is not his [...] It might have been George Blake, or Robert MacLennan. But undoubtedly much of it reflects Neil’s views, in particular about poetry groups, and as Editor of the *News* the ultimate responsibility was his.¹¹⁵

As Lendrum suggests, regardless of the actual author, the sentiments would have been endorsed by Munro as writer or as editor. The column suggests that:

the truest poetry in *Northern Numbers* has come from the pen of him to whom the collection is dedicated. Mr Munro contributed five poems, brief, sombre and moving, on themes apparently suggested by the names of bagpipe tunes. They have unique atmospheric quality; they “tell” – inevitably, as it were: and though they are so distinctly

¹¹² *Modernism & Nationalism*, p.100

¹¹³ *Scottish Literature*, p.708

¹¹⁴ *That Vital Spark*, p.104

¹¹⁵ *Neil Munro, The Biography*, p.234

“Highland” in inspiration, they are, at the same time, the truest possible expression of the Scottish spirit.

However, the content and merits of the volume are not the main thrust of the review. The writer draws attention to Grieve’s foreword, where Grieve notes,

If this venture is sufficiently successful, subsequent volumes [...] will be published at convenient intervals. No new contributor will, however, be admitted without the approval of the majority of the present group.

The column concludes that

I find it difficult to believe that there is such Group at all.

I cannot help regarding this Foreword as misleading, unconsciously misleading, but still phrased in such a way as to create a wrong impression in the mind of the non-professional reader, who may be led to believe that Messrs Munro and Buchan are members of an ambitious coterie. My point is that Messrs Munro and Buchan should not be graded quite so low.

Here Munro (or his proxy) deliberately distances himself from Grieve, and his contemporaries, and instead ranks himself on an equal artistic status as Buchan, a status superior to that of Grieve. He suggests that he was never a member of a Grieve-engineered group, had no involvement in the compilation of the volume and that it was ridiculous to suggest that such a mature writer would have anything in common with newly-published poets. Whether Grieve tried to involve Munro as a mark of respect, or in an attempt to increase his own credibility through association, is now a matter of judgement. Grieve did state, in the same introduction that, “for the most part the contributors are close personal friends, and that this is rather an experiment in group-publication than an anthology” without electing to add any real details of his actual relationships with the writers.

In July 1925, Grieve published an article on Neil Munro in *The Scottish Educational Journal*. This article followed two similar attacks, on John Buchan and J.M. Barrie, in the same

magazine. The piece made a number of acidic comments on Munro's place as a novelist and poet in Scottish and European Literature and as a journalist. He asserted a number of points:

Neil Munro is not a great writer, he is not even a *good* writer – at best he is no more than a (somewhat painfully) respectable craftsman.

And:

Now the fact of the matter is simply that Neil Munro is a minor artist and even so lacks the personality to make the most of the limited, yet indubitable, gifts he possesses. He has consistently served two Gods - and has not succeeded in avoiding the consequences of divided allegiance.

And:

He was not a great journalist in any sense of the term: it is difficult to imagine why any man of such parts as he had should continue to devote himself to work that in the last analysis can only be regarded as useless – unless it were sheer economic necessity, or an incurable hesitancy to “burn his boats behind him.”

And:

One little poem – a gem of its kind - is sure of life. That is “John o’ Lorn” already appearing in many anthologies [...] It will serve better than anything else he has written, I think, to perpetuate its author’s memory. His other poems are rhetorical, windy, empty for the most part and bear a curious impression of having been translated. Perhaps here we stumble upon a real clue. Had Neil Munro never learned English – and lived quietly in an entirely Gaelic-speaking community – he might have come to his true stature as an artist.¹¹⁶

Lesley Lendrum writes that on publication of the article a friend, John McIntyre, wrote to Munro, offering to launch a counter-attack on his behalf. Munro replied,

I intended to look out for the *Educational Journal*, having got a circular which indicated that Mr Grieve was to give me his critical attention, but I forgot about it and have not yet seen the paper. That he should find little – or perhaps nothing – to approve of in me and my work is only to be expected [...] Between what he may have to say of me in the *Educational Journal* and many too laudatory articles on me that have already appeared in that paper, the readers may perhaps get a fair impression of what I may be worth! [...] I hope no friends of mine will waste a line on him.

¹¹⁶ *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, The Scottish Educational Journal (Edinburgh: Lindsay & Co, 1976), p5/6

Lendrum takes the view that MacDiarmid had said too much and said too little. Many of his comments were personal and often ill-founded; he had no intimate knowledge or contact with Munro. He also expressed too little by way of literary criticism to support his judgements.¹¹⁷

The Scottish Educational Journal published on 14th October 1925 contained these comments from Donald A Mackenzie, another contributor to *Northern Numbers*, which seem to back Munro's opinions:

It is less embarrassing to be abused than to be praised by Mr C.M. Grieve.

I do not recognise Mr C.M. Grieve as a literary leader or guide. I do not wish to be associated with his movement, and my contributions to *Northern Numbers* were given before I knew that Mr Grieve intended to "run" that "stunt" of his.

[...] I do not belong to, and have never attempted to found, a little mutual admiration society.¹¹⁸

It is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Grieve launched his attack on Munro as a response to the criticism of *Northern Numbers* in the *Views and Reviews* column of 23rd December 1920, although, as some years had elapsed between the two publications, it was not an immediate response. Although Lendrum makes the judgement that Munro did not write this particular column he was the paper's editor and, by this time, it was no secret that he was approving the column's contents. Munro had not published any works of fiction in the period 1920-25; his last novel *The New Road* had been published in 1914. His only literary output was a third collection of *Para Handy* stories in 1923 (albeit in the guise of Hugh Foulis). However he seems to have fallen, in some way, in Grieve's estimation in the period.

¹¹⁷ Neil Munro- *The Biography*, p251/2

¹¹⁸ *Contemporary Scottish Studies*, *The Scottish Educational Journal*, p.49

It is significant that Munro chose not to respond to Grieve's taunts, in private correspondence or through his newspaper columns. Unlike his tussles with Geddes and Sharp, he maintained a dignified silence, perhaps now tired of the controversy courted by a brash, relatively young poet committed to the modernist cause who presumably had nothing in common with his own work and standards. As an elder statesman of literature perhaps Munro felt more secure in his reputation or less concerned with criticism.

The meaning of the last of Grieve's points, noted above: "Had Neil Munro never learned English – and lived quietly in an entirely Gaelic-speaking community – he might have come to his true stature as an artist" is puzzling and unclear. Although he was a strong supporter of the language, Munro never published in Gaelic, always in English or Scots, so it is difficult to gauge if there was any difference in quality. Also, unlike Conrad, there is no criticism suggesting that his use of English was strange, exotic, less than eloquent or was unclear. However, it is interesting that in 1998, Gilles Deleuze agreed with Grieve generally, suggesting that "a great writer is always a foreigner in the language in which he expresses himself, even if it is his native tongue".¹¹⁹ Certainly, Grieve made this comment at a time when Modernist writers, including Conrad, Joyce and Faulkner, were, or were about to be, making great efforts to learn comprehensively and then defamiliarise themselves from English. Perhaps he saw a Gaelic idiom in Munro's writing, disclosed and developed through the artifice of modernity into a different kind of art from that Munro expounded and delivered. The speculation that Munro's work may predate the language-idioms later used in the works of Neil Gunn and Fionn Mac Colla opens up lines of enquiry outside the scope of this thesis.

¹¹⁹ Bennett and Royle, *An Introduction to Literature, Criticism and Theory* (Harlow: Pearson, 2009), p.94

Part Two: Conclusion

Consideration of Neil Munro's journalism on either side of the Great War clearly indicates the deep continuities and sustaining strengths in his own sensibility and character. However, it also shows how distant he was becoming from the radical modern writers of a younger generation – MacDiarmid, Gibbon, Gunn amongst them. For Munro, the aspiration to write major novels in the new, post-War era had gone. Yet the value of the fiction he continued to produce in the three series of short stories, by which his fame and popularity were to continue, should be understood in this context. The *Para Handy*, *Erchie* and *Jimmy Swan* stories are not mere retrogressive signs of nostalgia but rather ways in which the modern world might be entered into, negotiated and inhabited in more sympathetic and satiric respects than some "modernists" would have endorsed.

17. The Episodic Fiction

The previous chapters discuss the daily journalistic work of Neil Munro in detail. Munro spent about thirty years in his various positions at the *Evening News* and continued the production of his episodic fiction throughout this period. His use of fiction in *The Looker-On* started in 1902 with *Earchie, My Droll Friend*. As each new story stream commenced, *Para Handy* in 1905 and *Jimmy Swan* in 1911, he had the opportunity to retire the previous sets but he chose to continue to produce new stories right up to his retiral. The formats of the stories were regular, especially in terms of length, but differed from set to set. The stories were popular, in their newspaper form and in terms of anthologies; William Blackwood said he was eager to take on the publication of new series in his regular correspondences to Munro. Munro seems to have had both an artistic and a financial reason to maintain production.

After initiating the first *Earchie* stories he may have taken some guidance in publishing from the success of the John Joy Bell's *Wee Macgreegor* stories. These tales originated in the *Glasgow Evening Times* before being published in book form in 1902 and concern the Robinsons: Paw (John), Maw (Lizzie), sister Jeanie and Wee Macgreegor.

On 23rd June 1903, Munro wrote to William Blackwood:

Bell's "Wee Macgreegor" was put together at my suggestion. [...] I must confess that the big sale of the book surprises me: I thought it would certainly do fairly well with Glasgow readers but never dreamt other parts of the country would take Macgreegor to their hearts.

The title, two or three catch-phrases, a certain naiveté in the treatment and the vein of sentimentalism have combined to do the trick.¹²⁰

Bell acknowledged his support, as noted by Burgess:

My earliest memory of Neil Munro is the memory of a kindness. Long ago, shortly after the publication of my first little book, he sent me a letter, in which he declared that if the little book's circulation did not promptly stop, he would come across the water with the family dirk and the stop the author's. Wasn't I the proud and happy writer?¹²¹

His critique of the reasons of Bell's success – "two or three catch-phrases, a certain naiveté in the treatment and the vein of sentimentalism" – could easily be applied to his own episodic fiction and may have been a template for *Ervhie*. Certainly this series is closest in subject matter and location to *Wee Macgregor*.

Mora Burgess, writing about the origins of short story writing in Glasgow in 1996, groups these two sets together:

Everybody knows J.J. Bell's *Wee Macgregor*, which was published in book form in 1902. Bell took a chance on book publication precisely because his short, humorous sketches had been so popular on their original appearance in the *Glasgow Evening Times*. Similarly, Neil Munro's *Para Handy* sketches, and his *Ervhie* sketches which are specifically set in Glasgow, were eagerly read in the *Evening News* before they were ever collected in book form.¹²²

Osborne and Armstrong make the point that,

Ervhie and Macgregor established the idea that the life and manners of the Glasgow working classes was an appropriate subject for literature. Both were taken to the hearts of the Glasgow people, as can be judged by the fact that they enjoyed a wide membership when they reappeared in book form.¹²³

¹²⁰ *Das Literarische Werk Neil Munro*, p.219

¹²¹ *Imagine a City*, p.85

¹²² *The Glasgow Short Story* by Moira Burgess in *Laverock 2*, 1996,

http://www.arts.gla.ac.uk/scotlit/asls/Laverock-Glasgow_Short_Story.html, accessed 08th June 2010

¹²³ Osborne and Armstrong (eds), *Mungo's City, A Glasgow Anthology* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 1999), p.224

Munro's stories share a number of characteristics: the use of a limited number of characters, a vague and imprecise chronology, an interaction with current events and social change and the use of a narrator. The tales all depend on dialogue rather than action. The characters talk about their experiences rather than enact them; they share memories and exaggerate their involvement in tales of drama and suspense, bolstering their self-importance at the expense of the others.

The first publication of *Earchie* was in the Looker-On column on 10th April 1902 and new episodes continued to be published in the *Evening News* until 1926, the year before Munro's retiral. These tales were Munro's first attempt at episodic fiction and the most enduring in his own time, although they have proved to be less long-lasting than the tales of the crew of the Vital Spark. The most recent anthology, edited by Brian D. Osborne and Ronald Armstrong and published in 2002 contains 142 episodes.

The first *Para Handy* story appeared in *The Looker-On* column in the *Evening News* on Monday, 16th January 1905. The story, entitled "Para Handy, Master Mariner" introduces the Skipper as "a short, thick set man, with a red beard, a hard round felt hat, ridiculously out of harmony with a blue pilot jacket and trousers and a seaman's jersey", giving as much information about the man's wardrobe as his features.¹²⁴ Munro continued the production and publication of *Para Handy* stories for nearly twenty years, until 1924, just before his retirement, and the series of stories, or at least some of the characters in the series, remain his most popular and well-known.

Jimmy Swan, the Joy Traveller first appeared in *The Looker-On* column in May 1911. Although less prolific in number than *Para Handy* and *Earchie*, the stories continued to be

¹²⁴ *Para Handy*, p.1

regularly published until 1917 with a late sporadic flurry between 1923 and 1926. The series is best represented by the publication of thirty-seven stories in 1993, although less comprehensive collections preceded it.

The three series shared many common features. Many of the stories are topical, in line with the commentary role of *The Looker-On*, referring to local and national events. In the main, the stories are organised around the dialogue of the characters, amongst themselves, or with family or friends. In this respect the stories have much similarity with the underlying structures of the series or soap-operas in that they relate to a “continuous story (usually involving the same characters and settings) which consist of self-contained episodes possessing their own individual conclusion”.¹²⁵ In addition, the episodic fiction form has an open narrative form, displays slow narrative progression and consists of the interaction of a group of characters in a fixed environment.¹²⁶ These features allow readers to understand the structure of the tales and engage quickly with the current situation, having full knowledge of the characters. The tales often meander; there is little narrative drive, the plot may be slight, the success of the story depends on how it is told. Humour and sarcasm is used freely, perhaps harking back to the Scots tradition of flyting.

Each series has a stable core cast. In *Ermie* the stories follow the everyday life of three characters: Ermie MacPherson, a waiter and the beadle of St Kentigern’s Kirk, his wife Jinniet, a housewife, and their friend James Duffy, the coalman. The episodes always feature at least two of these characters in interaction. Ermie pursues two distinct

¹²⁵ Glen Creeber, *Serial Television* (London: bfi publishing, 2004), p.8

¹²⁶ Richard Kilborn, *Television Soaps* (London: Batsford Ltd, 1992), p.36 & p.48

occupations, beadle and waiter, and is keen to separate his religious and secular identities. As he states in "Erichie", "At whit ye might call the social board I'm just Erchie."¹²⁷ At St Kentigern's Kirk, (appropriately named as St Kentigern is another name for St Mungo, the patron saint of the city) he stokes the boilers, snibs in the Minister in his pulpit and cleans the church, always maintaining a solemn dignity. He makes few comments about his religion and faith but he seems to yearn for more commitment and involvement, stating in "Erichie's Sermon", "That's the Kirk nooadays: it preaches for us, prays for us, and sings for us. We divna need to do onything at a' for oorsel's except try and keep awake and pit a penny in the plate."¹²⁸ As a waiter he serves and listens, treating his customers with a friendly respect. This deliberate split in presentation was copied by Munro when he adopted his Hugh Foulis persona to separate his episodic fiction from his more serious works.

On *the Vital Spark* the core is Para Handy, the skipper; Dougie, the first mate; Dan Macphail the engineer. These three are supplemented by The Tar or later, Sunny Jim, as second mate or cook and/or Hurricane Jack (or Jeck), a former colleague of Para Handy's. Para Handy is prone to gross exaggeration, bragging and over-confidence, best evidenced in one episode where he convinces himself, and informs his wife, that the boat sank and the rest of the crew were drowned in a terrible storm ("An Ocean Tragedy"). Dougie must be always present, "for the purposes of corroboration".¹²⁹ Dan Macphail flirts between his caustic and grimly realistic view of the world and life, not usually shared by his crewmates, and the fantasy world of airs and manners of his romantic novelettes. The Tar is lazy and shirks

¹²⁷ *Erichie, My Droll Friend*, p.138

¹²⁸ *Erichie, My Droll Friend*, p.204

¹²⁹ *Para Handy*, p.339

work and “was usually as tired when he rose in the morning as when he went to bed”¹³⁰. Hurricane Jeck is “a sort of demigod”, the best at everything - sailing, romance, fighting, philandering, “with an arm like a spear and the heart of a child.”¹³¹ Jeck, when absent from the puffer, is the subject of many of Para Handy’s best stories, as he seems to have acquired a mythical status in his mind; but like many of the details of the Captain’s tales he underperforms in reality, being as human and fallible as the rest of the crew. Sunny Jim is continually looking to play a trick, have fun or make a fast buck. The Vital Spark becomes as much a character as the rest, eulogised by her skipper as the “smertest boat in the tred”¹³² but described more truthfully, by our occasional nameless narrator, as “the most uncertain puffer that ever kept the Old New Year in Upper Lochfyne” with a boiler that “was apt to prime”.¹³³ Although Para Handy is nominally the captain he is seldom in charge; authority lies outside the boundary of the crew, off the boat, with the owners. If they can find the boat and crew they issue orders. However, the owner’s commands are seldom heeded. The crew conspire to poach fish and game, spend time in the many harbour taverns and participate in as many Highland weddings as possible.

Jimmy Swan is a travelling salesman for the Glasgow firm of Campbell & Macdonald. He supplies a clientele of rural drapers and haberdashers with dry goods - clothes, accessories and material. Swan is married to Bella and they have had two children, John who is 21 and Anne, who would be 23 “if she had been spared”.¹³⁴ Jimmy Swan is a social class above Erchie. He deliberately adopts a different persona when he engages with clients, either when he visits them in the country or if they come to Glasgow. He is careful to mirror their

¹³⁰ *Para Handy*, p.10

¹³¹ *Para Handy*, p.41

¹³² *Para Handy*, p.15

¹³³ *Para Handy*, p.2/3

¹³⁴ *Jimmy Swan, The Joy Traveller*, p.348

appearance, language and interests to enter their confidence, gain their respect and make or maintain his sales. This trait emerges as the series of stories proceeds. While we are presented with episodes where Jimmy is seen as a trusted friend and colleague to all his clients, in one story – “The Radiant Jimmy Swan” – he admits that his conduct and manners are designed to maximise his sales. In a dialogue with the landlord of a country hotel, on the occasion of a customer’s daughter’s wedding, which he is credited with setting up, he admits that his interest and involvement in a list of activities is purely to please his customers: he dislikes the games of bowls, football and curling; he resents his membership of the Masonic Lodge in Inverness, the Ancient Shepherds in Kirkcudbright and the Royal Foresters in Alloway and he’s unsure how he came to be affiliated to six Gardener’s Lodges north of the Forth. While this appears to be a cynical view it is also, probably, a realistic self-evaluation and consequence of his customer-centred approach. He now seems weary and perhaps craves rebellion:

but the lang and the short o’t is that I’ve learned my trade, paid my ‘prentice fees and can now afford tae dae what I like.¹³⁵

The characters are also defined by their language and the use of catch-phrases that punctuate and give emphasis to their utterances, rehearsing well-worn routines and building up defences against direct or implied criticisms. Erchie maintains that he has “a flet fit but a warm hert”. Para Handy thinks most people and most things are “chust sublime” and is happiest when “set on his heels” after a small libation or engaged in “high jeenks”. Jimmy Swan’s catch-phrase – “from scenes like these auld Scotia’s grandeur springs” – is

¹³⁵ *Jimmy Swan, The Joy Traveller*, p.460

borro . This well-known phrase is used as a form of punctuation or emphasis, to close a conversation, to make a final point.

Each set of characters inhabits a set environment and uses a different form of language. Erchie, Jinnet and Duffy live their lives in a tenement in Glasgow, near Cowcaddens and the New City Road, to the north of the city centre, and the tales reflect a warm appreciation and deep knowledge of the ins-and-outs of this city lifestyle. The tales are based on urban issues and customs while the countryside is treated with great suspicion and ignorance.

The Vital Spark presents Munro with the chance to move from the urban to the rural and back, mixing sensibilities and attitudes from both settings, reflecting his upbringing in, and knowledge of, Inverary and Loch Fyne and his adult life in Glasgow. The Skipper and the first mate comprise the Gaelic and Highland heart of the crew, with Macphail, The Tar and Sunny Jim providing a Scots/English and Lowland balance. The balance seems to epitomise a polarity in attitude and approach between the two sects; Highland vs. Lowland, romanticism vs. pragmatism and optimism vs. pessimism. (with Macphail having a place on either side).

Jimmy Swan, unlike Munro's other regular characters, has no coterie of friends or colleagues; rather he constantly travels the country engaging periodically with his customers, chatting to hotel staff and passing the time with an ever-changing group of other salesmen, each selling their own selection of specialized goods. It is an old-fashioned, comfortable set-up, quaint and slow-paced, apparently founded on an exchange of trust and respect between salesman and merchant. As Osborne and Armstrong remark in their

introduction to their compilation, “it is entirely typical of Munro that he should choose to write a series of stories about a vanished or vanishing world”.¹³⁶

In each series, discussion and conversation is initiated and maintained by a narrator who is separate and distant from the characters. In *Erchie*, a nameless narrator is often employed to ask questions and spark conversations, and being a newspaper reporter he is asked either to remain discrete or broadcast a story, as circumstances demand. For example, in “Holidays”, we have this exchange:

“Will ye be puttin’ ony o’ this bit crack in the papers?”

“Well I don’t know, Erchie; I hope you won’t mind if I do.”

“Oh, I’m no heedin’; it’s a yin to Erchie, and does nae harm to my reputation, though I think sometimes your spellin’s a wee but aft the plumb.”¹³⁷

Although never clarified, it is probably safe to assume that the narrator has Munro’s voice.

In the Para Handy stories the narrator, named as “Young Munro” in the first episode, is the Skipper’s confidante, acting as a foil to the captain, giving Para Handy an opportunity to expound, to explain, and to give his version of events without the crew’s chorus.

The use of a narrator allows Jimmy Swan an independent, intimate voice and the chance to explain his motives and opinions in depth. It is best seen in the episode “Universal Provider” where Jimmy outlines how he acts as a provider for the country customers. The closing exchange highlights his approach and perhaps comments on the respectful and equal relationship between the narrator and the main character:

“You’re a marvel, Mr Swan”, I said. “Not at all”, said Jimmy. “I’m only a business man. You can get any mortal thing you like in Glasgow if you have the business experience and the ready money”.

¹³⁶ *Jimmy Swan, The Joy Traveller*, p. xvii

¹³⁷ *Erchie, My Droll Friend*, p.65

Throughout the stories, the main characters speak in a Glaswegian form of Scots. The exception is the narrator, who uses a more standard form of English, perhaps indicating his higher class, better level of education or journalistic credentials. The distance opened up therefore reinforces the sense of difference and dignity Munro wished to preserve. But it also demonstrates an affectionate closeness between the narrator and the characters. If there is an element of condescension in the stance this is countered by sympathy, and a liking for the characters. Munro was happy to continue the use of the “Gleska” accent in all the tales, perhaps indicating its appropriateness for, and comprehensibility to, the readers of the *Evening News*. However he also perceived the use of dialect as a block to a wider readership of the collected stories, especially in England and abroad. Writing to Blackwood in 1905 on the possibility of them publishing a collection of Para Handy stories he said, “The dialect, for one thing, is reduced to a minimum and the articles are quite within the comprehension of the English reader without any glossary”.¹³⁸

Language is therefore used very specifically and differently in each series. In *Ermie*, the main characters speak in a Glaswegian accent which is perhaps more ruralised than the accent today. This conversation between Ermie and Duffy emphasises the exchange of information and friendly barbs. The initial narration of the conversation adds to the dialogue, building in redundancy to aid understanding, framing what’s said, adding a layer of sarcasm and irony to what is spoken.

“Whaur are ye gaun the day?” said Ermie to Duffy on Saturday afternoon when he came on the worthy coalman standing at his own close-mouth, looking up and down the street with the hesitation of a man who deliberates how he is to make the most of his Saturday half-holiday.

¹³⁸ *Ermie, My Droll Friend*, p.xxiv

"I was just switherin'," said Duffy. "Since I got married and stopped gaun to the Mull o' Kintyre Vaults, there's no' much choice for a chap. I micht as weel be leevin' in the country for a' the life I see."

"Man, aye!" said Erchie, "that's the warst o' Gleska; there's nae life in't – naethin daein'. Ye should try yer hand at takin' oot the wife for a walk, jist for the novelty o' the thing."

"Catch me!" said Duffy. "She wad see ower mony things in the shop windows she was needin'. I was jist wonderin' whether I wad buy a Weekly Mail or gang to the fitba' match at Parkheid."

In *Para Handy*, Munro draws attention to the Gaelic (i.e. "Gaalic") lilt of the skipper and mate, softening their accent through their vocabulary, the spelling and pronunciation of words, crafting a version of English to represent their inflections. He contrasts this with the harder Glasgow and Lanarkshire accents of the engineer and mate, as illustrated below.

"By chove! But they're bad the night" said Dougie, running a grimy paw across his forehead.

"Perfectly ferocious!" said Para Handy, slapping his neck. "This fair beats Bowmore, and Bowmore iss namely for its mudges. I never saw the brutes more desperate! You would actually think they were whustlin' on wan another, cryin', 'Here's a clean sailor, and he hasna a collar on, gather about, boys!'"

"Oh criftens! whimpered Sunny Jim, in agony, dabbing his face incessantly with what looked suspiciously like a dish-cloth, "I've see'd midges afore this, but they never had spurs on their feet afore. Ya-h-h! I wish I was back in Gleska! They can say what they like aboot the Clyde, but anywhere above Bowlin' I'll guarantee ye'll no' be eaten alive. If they found a midge in Gleska, they would put it in the Kelvingrove Museum."

Macphail, his face well lubricated, came up from among the engines, and jeered. "Midges never bothered me," said he contemptuously. "If ye had been wi' me on the West Coast o' Africa, and felt the mosquitoes, it wouldna be aboot a wheen o' gnats ye would mak' a sang. It's a' a hallucination aboot midges; I can only speak aboot them the way I find them, and they never did me ony harm. Perhaps it's no midges that's botherin' ye efter a'."

"Perhaps no," said Para Handy, with great acidity. "Perhaps it's hummin'-birds, but the effect iss chust the same..."¹³⁹

The *Jimmy Swan* stories are focussed on the main character and his journeys around Scotland rather than a social group. The tales seem more formal and most start with a scene-setting introduction, such as:

¹³⁹ *Para Handy*, "Mudges", p.280

Having finished high tea at the George Hotel, Jimmy Swan [...] sought out his usual bedroom, and searched his bag for his slippers.¹⁴⁰

When Jimmy Swan is travelling in the North [...] ¹⁴¹

There are villages to which Jimmy Swan goes [...] ¹⁴²

James Swan had a friend, a traveller in the line of Fancy Goods, who came originally [...] from Skye.¹⁴³

From the 1st of May till well on in October no one for years has seen James Swan in business hours without a flower in his coat lapel.¹⁴⁴

Jimmy speaks in a more refined Glasgow accent than Erchie, as illustrated in this conversation with the narrator:

“Now if there’s one thing a traveller in the dry goods line should study it’s the human mind as often seen in drapers. Ye may tell them the funniest Gleska bawrs and show them Jap schappes and silk marocains there’s no the like o’ offered north o’ Perth, at prices fair ridiculous, but if the suit ye’re wairin’ yoursel’ is scuffed and your hat’s the least bit chafed it’s dominos for big orders. Ye have no idea o’ the effect o’ a good silk hat and nae dandruff on the retail trade. It fair dazzles shopkeepers in the rural belt that never themselves wear anything but a hooker-doon, and aye look as if they shed their hair wi’ a curry-comb”.¹⁴⁵

The use of language, the intervention of the narrator and the scene-setting all help to give the reader an immediate engagement with the text. All relevant information is provided as quickly as possible. The written representations of the accents aid the hearing of the voice, rather than obscure it, in contrast with some of the dialogue in the *Wee Macgregor* stories. For example, in this passage there is a self conscious quality to the written representation of speech, clearly intended for comic effect:

“Are we near there, Paw?” inquired Macgregor, looking up to his father’s face.

John looked down at his son, smothered an exclamation of agony, and replied in the affirmative.

“Whit wey dae folk get likenesses token?” asked the boy.

¹⁴⁰ Jimmy Swan, “A Spree”, p.332

¹⁴¹ Jimmy Swan, “From Fort William”, p.342

¹⁴² Jimmy Swan “A Great Night”, p.358

¹⁴³ Jimmy Swan. “The Changed Man”, p.382

¹⁴⁴ Jimmy Swan “Roses, Roses, All the Way”, p.444

¹⁴⁵ Jimmy Swan. “Jimmy Swan in Warm Weather”, p.466

“Dod, ye may weel spier, Macgreegor! It’s yer Maw wants a pictur’ to gie to yer Granpaw Purdie.”

“I’m no’ wantin’ to be taken’, Paw.”

“Are ye no’, wee man? Deed, I’m gey sweirt masel’. But yer Maw wants the pictur’.”

“Whit’s that ye’re sayin’ to Macgreegor, John?” said Lizzie.

“Aw,” replied her husband, turning to her, and wincing as the collar bit him. “Macgreegor an’ me wis thinkin’ we wis feart fur the photygrapher.”¹⁴⁶

Neil Munro concerns himself with the lives of everyday people as they travel through the landscape of the turn of the century, dealing with change on all sides – technology, world war, education and social reforms. He writes their stories with respect, granting them dignity, showing their humour. His tales are temporary in nature, written as ephemera, to be discarded after reading the newspaper but through time they established a literary permanence. However they are also fixed and static; the characters do not age, they continue in their jobs, they are not inflicted by disease or infirmity. They remain fundamentally the same throughout. This is sharp contrast to Wee Macgreegor who grew up, found a wife (in *Courtin’ Christina* in 1913) and eventually joined the Highland Light Infantry in (*Wee Macgreegor Enlists* in 1915).

Throughout the long runs of his stories, Neil Munro utilises a sophisticated set of literary tools to present and maintain a commentary on the working life of Glasgow and its environs. He establishes sets of realistic characters that react to their surroundings, interact with each other and demonstrate a set of respectable values in their actions and their words. This model worked for over twenty years, commanding a place in the Evening News and a large and regular readership. Each series had a leading, charismatic figure: Erchie the

¹⁴⁶ J. J. Bell, *Wee Macgreegor* (Edinburgh: Nelson & Sons, 1902), “A Caybinet Growp”, p.54

commentator and voice of the people; Para Handy the trickster and teller of tall tales; Jimmy Swan the herald and knight of the road. By contrast with Para Handy and Erchie, the Jimmy Swan stories have a sustained quality of pathos, centred on the figure of a middle-aged, middle-class salesman whose life is determined by the economic context – as is Para Handy's and Erchie's – but whose resilience resides in a moral quality, a kind of ordinary goodness. He is not a trickster-figure like Para Handy, nor a catalyst for comedy and comment like Erchie: rather he is a kind of bourgeois Everyman, anti-heroic but noble, a Leopold Bloom of Glasgow, a rambling herald delivering and collecting tales of domesticity from the city and the hinterlands as he makes his lonely way through a disappearing world.

18. Conclusion

Literary Renaissance are the most hopeless of enterprises:

*An artist ... even in antique and classic themes – must ever work for his age and his people.*¹⁴⁷

In the preceding chapters I have examined Neil Munro's journalism in detail, as it emerged in the *Views and Reviews* and *Looker-On* columns, considering his literary criticism, commentary on current affairs and his episodic fiction. While the two columns had different aims they share common elements that define Munro's ideals, style and literary techniques, such as the use of dialogue by "the Cast" and his fictional characters.

Neil Munro emerges as a man of many paradoxes: he is a Gael who writes exclusively in English and Scots; he combines a Victorian formality with humour and surrealism; he claims all art is beauty but insists that artists must exhibit their passion in their work; he craves change and, at the same time, derides and mistrusts the agents of change.

His episodic fiction could be described as fractal literature, following on from the work of Koch and Mandelbrot in mathematics and science. Each episode contains the same vital elements as the whole story; there are only marginal changes in characters, plot, and language. The overarching chronicle story is not an accumulation of smaller, different blocks; it is just a bigger block, with the same essential parts. This aspect is described as self similarity, the placing of a pattern within a greater pattern.¹⁴⁸ Mandelbrot makes the point that "art that satisfies lacks scale, in the sense that it contains important elements at all sizes".¹⁴⁹

¹⁴⁷ *Views and Reviews*, 21st May 1896

¹⁴⁸ James Gleick, *Chaos* (London: Cardinal, 1991), p.103

¹⁴⁹ *Chaos*, p.117

In relation to his literary criticism and social comment he looked back, nostalgically and for comfort, to what he considered a tradition of romanticism, while still self-conscious of the literary developments that would take literature forward, after the Great War. His interest in the arts was complemented by a new passion for technology which would address social ills, improve communication and encourage dialogue.

Furthermore, although his thoughts, opinions and standards are present throughout this thesis, “Neil Munro” himself has been either anonymous or invisible. As noted, his columns had no by-line and sometimes it is a mistake to think him the reporter; he adopted the “Hugh Foulis” nom de plume to brand the collections of stories, keeping his own name for his “serious” fiction. However, he was present as a commentator, the sole voice in a monologue in the column, perhaps a voice in a dialogue or discussion, as a member of the “Cast”. He was always close and nearby to Para Handy, Erchie and Jimmy Swan, acting as a reporter and narrator. In the *Evening News* he inhabited and populated the Glasgow of his time. James Hamilton Muir, (an artistic “collective” consisting of Muirhead Bone, James Bone and Archibald Hamilton Charteris), in their book, *Glasgow in 1901*, described the life of the city in three parts: Glasgow of the Imagination, Glasgow of Fiction – The Man and his Haunts and Glasgow of Fact – The Place. Munro paid tribute to their “quite unusual knowledge and literary talents” and their metaphor for the city well describes Munro’s contribution to literature of, and about, the city.¹⁵⁰ While his columns appeared to be concerned with fact he weaved his own opinions and views so closely into the text that he took on a mythical and surreal quality. His view of Glasgow was founded in his own imagination, was populated by his characters and depended on his standards and opinions. His Glasgow was an accumulation of every past event, combined with new and modern

¹⁵⁰ *Mungo’s City, A Glasgow Anthology*, p.171

wonders; he knew the background to every story and event. He imagined the city for his readers. His approach was evolutionary, not revolutionary.

In one important aspect, Neil Munro's episodic fiction and commentaries on artistic, social and societal issues and events are different from other contemporary writers; they emanate from daily journalism. It was all originally contained in the *Evening News* and as such must have met the normal journalistic styles and manners of the day. It could be controversial, critical and obtuse but it had to meet the contemporary decency and language standards of the respectable man and woman in the street. It could not be profane; it could not examine the more disturbing and base aspects of society. It could not be, or at least remain, obscure: it had to be clear, easily comprehensible and immediate. It is unfair to compare Munro's presentation of ideas and style of writing with writers such as Joyce and MacDiarmid. Their audience was self-selecting; they chose to buy the specific books and journals. Munro's primary audience bought the newspaper, and consequentially might read the column. This was true of all the writers who wrote their novels in instalments, publishing first in journals and magazines before book publication, such as Kipling, Wells and Dickens.

This might prompt discussion about those aspects of contemporary life Munro did not write about. He was largely silent about the Great War and contemporary Glasgow figures who opposed it, like John MacLean. However his apparent silence may be due to issues of censorship and editorial policy, as suggested in Chapter 12. However such speculation is outwith the scope of this thesis.

Neil Munro's *Views and Reviews* and *Looker-On* columns provided a regular and consistent statement on the arts and life in Glasgow for a period of over thirty years. He monitored

and addressed the changes in the world through the characters in his series of stories, an achievement to be lauded. In this thesis, I have deliberately not considered the major achievements of Munro's novels; however, by focussing closely on his journalism, before and after the Great War, I hope I have shown that this work constituted another kind of major achievement, which continued long after he had stopped writing novels.

This achievement begins in the daily journalism, arts criticism and the open-minded attitudes of a man working in newspapers in the late nineteenth century. It develops through an understanding of the absolute need to adapt, to look beyond the horrors of World War I, while challenging the unpredicted conditions of modernity. Finally it results in the three sequences of episodic fiction, each centred on a different character, or set of characters, and each coming into a balanced view of the values emerging in the twentieth century. In a period of upheaval and revolutionary change, Munro's real and most lasting achievement is one of continuity. This continuity resides not in reactionary nostalgia for the past but in a determined adherence to forms of popular fiction, running from Scott to Stevenson to Munro himself. In particular, the *Jimmy Swan* stories point forward to the later twentieth-century world of middle-class ennui and the loneliness of the long-distance commercial traveller. Jimmy Swan is, perhaps, the literary grandfather of Philip Larkin's Mr Bleaney, in the poem of the same name, or Alasdair Gray's John McLeod in *1982, Janine*. But Jimmy Swan also sustains older qualities of middle-class decency, a kind of moral honesty, domestic sympathy and good humour, deeper than the diplomacies or duplicities forced upon him by commercial priorities.

In *Para Handy*, *Erchie* and *Jimmy Swan* Munro's unpretentious, anti-fanatical, enlightened humour and imagination brought him well into the twentieth century where his sympathies,

open-mindedness and pleasure in life charted a path through the most violent period of revolutionary change in the modern world. Not only the survival of his work, but its long-standing popularity, testifies to the durability of his sustained and hopeful vision.

Appendix 1

The History of the Evening News

Source: Joan P.S. Ferguson, *The Directory of Scottish Newspapers* (Edinburgh: National Library of Scotland, 1984)

Title	From	To
Glasgow Evening Post	1866	1868
Evening Journal	1869	1870
Star	1870	1872
Evening Star	1872	1875
Evening News and Star	1875	1888
Glasgow Evening News	1888	1905
Glasgow News	1905	1915
Evening News	1915	1957

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