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**McPhie, Alexander G.**

**(2023)**

***Held in Place:***

***Landscape and human ecology in the work of Neil M. Gunn***

**MPhil(R) Thesis**

***Held in Place:***

*Landscape and human ecology in the work of Neil M. Gunn*

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BA (Hons), MA

*Submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the  
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## Abstract

This work considers conceptions and representations of landscape and nature in three novels by Neil M. Gunn (*Butchers Broom* (1934), *Highland River* (1937), *The Silver Darlings*, (1941)) along with a selection of essays and secondary writing. It discusses Gunn's works as expressions of human ecology and literary activism. Gunn's human ecology is regarded as deriving from the experience of dwelling and the traditional cultural landscape of the Scottish Highlands. The novels are argued to have continuing relevance to later environmental concerns, highlighting the issue of land ownership as unresolved and problematic. Consideration is given to Gunn's conception of the natural and how its meaning has changed since the novels were published. Gunn's interest in anarchist ideas is explored in relation to his literary focus on fundamental aspects of life such as food and shelter. This is linked to his attention to community, mutual aid and human nature. Representations of animal sentience in texts are discussed as moral problems. Gunn's aesthetic sense of landscape is argued to draw on sociobiological ideas that highlight sustainability and safety. It is argued that environmental issues in his work are inseparable from concepts of dwelling and human ecology. The novels show landscapes as historical sites where ideas, forces and cultures contend and conflict. Gunn's conception of the contemporary derives from his acute awareness of the past and its agency in the present. It takes the form of a synthesis of history and myth whose span reaches from ancient hunter-gatherer societies to the 1930s. This attention to how people lived with the land, and the culture which emerged from that relationship, underpins Gunn's conception of what a fulfilling and ethical way of life might be in both present and future.

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## Abbreviations

*BB Butcher's Broom*

*SD The Silver Darlings*

*HR Highland River*

*HP Highland Pack*

*GC The Grey Coast*

*MT Morning Tide*

*MCB The Man Who Came Back*

*DW The Drinking Well*

*GIGD The Green Isle of the Great Deep*

*SS Second Sight*

*OB Off in a Boat*

*AD The Atom of Delight*



## Introduction

This thesis examines the subject of landscape in a selection of writing by Neil M. Gunn. Its title points to how Gunn's texts demonstrate the role of landscape in shaping and being shaped by the lives of its inhabitants. Gunn's writing of the relationship of people to the natural world is regarded as an expression of human ecology and this work explores some of the ways it is presented. The focus is primarily upon three novels, *Butcher's Broom*, *The Silver Darlings* and *Highland River* (first published in 1934, 1941 and 1937) but also draws on other of his novels as well as letters and essays.<sup>1</sup> The novels have been selected for two reasons. First, the time and place of their setting make it possible to consider the biography of their communities and landscapes over an extended and important period, from the onset of the Clearances to the mid-1930s. Second, they contain some of Gunn's best writing of the natural world, presenting their stories in a rich range of styles, moods and perspectives. This work examines his portrayals of the relationship between people, the landscapes they inhabit and the wider natural environment. These subjects form the core of his writing and are the medium for his discussion of the broad range of economic, political and cultural matters that concerned him. As such, the novels offer insights to the complex of meanings Gunn saw existing in the natural world and to how they were formed. Much of Gunn's work has an activist character and suggests what he considered a fulfilling and ethical life might be based upon. This frequently centres on ideas of how communities sustain themselves and, in turn, highlights the subjects that Gunn regarded as key to their success. These include enduring historical concerns such as land ownership and use. Gunn's fiction presents traditional Highland life as characterised by knowledge and experience that has a value which transcends location and historical period. This gives the novels an enduring and even prophetic quality which resonates in the first decades of twenty-first century Scotland.

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<sup>1</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *Butcher's Broom* (Edinburgh: The Porpoise Press, 1934)

Neil M. Gunn, *The Silver Darlings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969)

Neil M. Gunn, *Highland River* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996)

Neil M. Gunn, *Highland Pack* (Glasgow: Richard Drew Publishing Ltd., 1989)

The broad scope of the novels' engagement with Highland life is implied in how they are often seen in relation to each other. Various critics have explored ways by which groupings might reveal significant themes of literary style or concerns.<sup>2</sup> The three considered together in this work also illustrate this. Gunn's essays too have been edited into various arrangements, sometimes as collections of Gunn texts, sometimes selected to sit alongside works from other writers.<sup>3</sup> This diversity offers a variety of ways to follow topics and the complimentary nature of Gunn's writing is an important factor in assessing its contribution to contemporary discussion. Similarly, no single text contains all of Gunn's most compelling writing and there is value in drawing from a wide range, including works argued to have less literary merit. Referring to *Second Sight* for example, Margery McCulloch suggests that Gunn 'sidesteps' a potential moral dilemma concerning hunting and argues that this limits the novel's plot.<sup>4</sup> However, while this may be true the novel still provides material to explore with regard to attitudes to hunting that are not dependent on its formal success. Such problems might reflect Gunn's own real life ambivalence which can, in turn, offer insights into his attitudes.

Gunn writes as a leading participant in a tradition of Scottish authors who felt compelled to write about the Clearances and the parallel erosion of Gaelic culture. In so doing he drew upon community histories which included powerful eyewitness accounts.<sup>5</sup> Much of this writing now has iconic status in Scottish literary consciousness.<sup>6</sup> Such texts represent the violence

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<sup>2</sup> Margery McCulloch, *The Novels of Neil M Gunn – A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987) p. 5. Christopher John Lawson Stokoe, 'Closing the Circle: Neil Gunn's creation of a 'meta-novel' of the Highlands' (unpublished doctoral thesis, University of Glasgow, 2007) p.9.

Douglas Gifford, 'Neil Gunn and the Mythic Regeneration of Scotland: The Two Epic Cycles', in Diarmid Gunn and Isobel Murray, eds., *Neil Gunn's Country: Essays in Celebration of Neil Gunn* (Edinburgh: Chambers, 1991), pp.75-6.

<sup>3</sup> Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939* (Glasgow: The Association of Literary Studies, 2004)

Gunn, *Highland Pack*,

Neil M. Gunn, *Belief in Ourselves*, (Dunbeath: Whittles, 2010)

The three titles noted above are noted as examples of a wider range of publications

<sup>4</sup> Margery McCulloch, *The Novels of Neil Gunn: A Critical Study*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p.150.

<sup>5</sup> James Hunter, *Set Adrift Upon the World: The Sutherland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2015) pp. 452-3., p. 71., pp.227-8.

<sup>6</sup> Charles W. J. Withers, 'Landscape, Memory, History: Gloomy Memories and the 19th-century Scottish Highlands' in *Scottish Geographical Journal*, 121:1, 29-44, online DOI: 10.1080/00369220518737219 pp.29-32

Sorley MacLean, *From Wood to Ridge: Collected Poems in Gaelic and English* (London: Vintage, 1989) pp.227-231, pp.64-104.

Norman MacCaig, *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993) pp.224-231.

Iain Crichton Smith, *Consider the Lilies* (London: Pergamon Press, 1966).

and destruction of the events themselves but like Gunn's novels they too express the conflict as one of opposing worldviews which conceive of nature in radically contrasting ways.

The many dimensions of Gunn's literary landscapes indicate the subject's interdisciplinary nature and how this breadth has implications for the ways in which it might be approached: creating a potential mix of literary, scientific and political themes.<sup>7</sup> Terry Gifford expresses this as 'the urgent need to reconnect science and ethics, fact and fiction, poetry and policy in our informed reflections upon current environmental debates'.<sup>8</sup> In the context of his own writing, Gunn describes landscape in terms that address both sensory and cognitive aspects and his essay *Caithness and Sutherland* is a good example of how he blends these together.<sup>9</sup> In it he describes memories of sensations (sight, taste, sound, cold) and presents them as part of the embodied experience of moving about these landscapes. These, in turn, become the source of other memories and associations: diversely concerning ideas of beauty, cultural tradition, history and politics. Its style moves between the realist and everyday to the descriptive and poetic, with their interchange being a distinctive quality.

In her study of the ecology and modern Scottish literature, Louisa Gairn highlights how in our era, characterised by preoccupations with consumerism and globalisation existing alongside acute environmental crises, the human need for 'nature' and all it signifies in terms of aesthetic quality and imaginative possibility becomes increasingly important. Gairn proposes that while the term 'ecology' may be relatively modern such concerns have always been an important part of Scottish writing and she draws attention to works by Gunn to support her argument. She cautions against taking an overly anthropocentric view of the natural world but notes the importance of the presence of people as a component part of nature itself and in so doing highlights one of Gunn's own fundamental principles. To illustrate her point Gairn cites the concept of wilderness and warns of the dangers of considering the Scottish Highlands

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John McGrath, *The Cheviot, the Stag and the Black, Black Oil* (London: Bloomsbury, 1981) ebook.

<sup>7</sup> Simon P. James, *Environmental Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015) p.7

<sup>8</sup> Terry Gifford, 'Ownership and access in the work of John Muir, John Buchan and Andrew Greig' in *Green Letters*, Green Letters, 2013, 17:2, 164-174, <DOI: 10.1080/14688417.2013.800334> [accessed 8 December 2021] p.166

<sup>9</sup> *LL*, pp. 1-12.

as a wild and untouched landscape. Her argument implies the importance of considering ecological and social issues as part of the same concern and so connects historical landscape changes to their modern forms and debates.<sup>10</sup> The literary expression of this heritage is characterised by Christopher Smout's comment that, 'The Gaelic poets were in every sense poets of the people, and their language is of a direct delight in nature'.<sup>11</sup> Gunn's texts, with their own particular valuing of 'delight' continue this line. Although writing in English, Gunn is argued to be of the Gaelic tradition whose work emerges from the complex of relationships between the individual and the land conceived as 'duthchas'.<sup>12</sup> It is not the purpose of this work to consider landscapes solely within that frame but its relevance to Gunn and environmental debate is acknowledged and aspects of it form important parts of the discussion.<sup>13</sup>

Gunn is considered here as an activist whose writing is both a literary and a political expression, with the success of his best works resting upon how he combines persuasiveness in his social criticism with the poetry of his prose. Both of these are deeply rooted in distinctive individual and communal experience. James Hunter notes the historical clash between Highland culture and that of the representatives of the economically, politically and militarily dominant south and frames Gunn's approach in the context of imperialism, where he notes that 'to attempt to recover and reinterpret sympathetically the much derided 'native' past is to engage in an act of protest, even of rebellion.'<sup>14</sup> Gunn's insistence on reinterpretation of this past, with its emphasis upon the crucial importance of the human in landscape and its attention to what has become referred to as sustainability, dovetails with core environmental debates. One of the most prominent of these is the (re)emergence of community ownership

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<sup>10</sup> Louisa Gairn, 'Introduction' in *Ecology and Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008) p. 2.

<sup>11</sup> T. C. Smout, *Nature Contested: Environmental History of Scotland and Northern England Since 1600* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press), p.18

<sup>12</sup> John Murray, *Literature of the Gaelic Landscape* (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2017) p. vii.

<sup>13</sup> Andrew J. Sneddon, "We will beat the landlords and the scenic sentimentalists": Neil M. Gunn and Landscape Discourse in the 'Hydro' Debates' *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, 5 (2009) 1-26 <International Journal of Scottish Literature> [accessed 25 January 2023] (stir.ac.uk) (3-4)

John Burns, *A Celebration of the Light: Zen in the Novels of Neil Gunn* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1988), p.3

Meg Bateman and John Purser, *Window to the West: Culture and Environment in the Scottish Gaidealtachd* (Sleat: Clo Ostaig, Sabhail Mor Ostaig, 2020), <<http://www.smo.uhi.ac.uk/files/PDFs/Window-to-the-West.pdf>> [accessed 17 July 2022] p.246. ebook.

<sup>14</sup> (Quoting Edward Said) in James Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1995), p.33

of land, with its roots in concepts of indigenous rights. This is often referred to in his work which argues that ‘The land and all it contains is the common heritage’ (*BB*, p. 71). As such, his stories can be viewed as relevant and contemporary works rather than historical, dated artifacts of the past. Such a reading rejects the inevitability of land appropriation and instead advocates a process whereby:

... marginalised minority groups use shared public notions of their having been historically dispossessed by incoming powerful land owners, and of their seeking to persist with socially and ecologically sustainable practices, to secure support for their attempts to reclaim community control over land and over their political processes.<sup>15</sup>

Gunn was a prolific essayist, widely published in a range of magazines and other outlets, and there is extensive material which sets out the worldview that underpinned his fiction. His essays are often poetic and literary in style and the novels are frequently educational and polemical so his fiction and non-fiction can be regarded as extensions of one another, unsurprising in someone who was an activist both inside and outside the literary world. Collectively, they engage with their concerns in ways that invite comparisons with later forms, thereby contributing to judgements about the continuing relevance of his work.<sup>16</sup> This thesis therefore notes some examples of later environmental and political developments that might indicate whether or how they may still resonate.

Chapter 1 sets out the conceptual framework through which representations of landscape are considered and argues why Gunn’s perspective continues to be relevant. It notes how dualistic

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<sup>15</sup> Justin Kenrick, ‘Scottish land reform and indigenous peoples’ rights: self-determination and historical reversibility’, *Social Anthropology*, Vol 19, Iss. 27 May 2011, 189-203 <doi-org.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1111/j.1469-8676.2011.00148.x> [accessed 19 September 2023] (195)

<sup>16</sup> Sneddon, ‘We will beat the landlords...’ p.4

Alistair McCleery, ‘Scottish Literary Movements and Magazines’, *The Bibliothek; a Scottish Journal of Bibliography and Allied Topics* Jan 1, 1998; 23, 97-114

<<http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/scottish-literary-movements-magazines/docview/1298486729/se-2>> [accessed 26 September 2023] (104-6)

ideas of land ‘use’ and ‘delight’ have, in the history of environmental thinking, been often presented as conflicting opposites. Oppositions and their outcomes are central characteristics of Gunn’s work and his writing is often directed towards how they can be synthesised or reconciled. His historical position is argued to be a significant one as he writes as someone who strongly affirms the value of traditional culture but is simultaneously engaged with the changes underway in the Highlands. This sense of someone writing at a transition point is reflected in his being an Anglophone author who is formed by a Gaelic tradition, a position which defines him as both insider and outsider.<sup>17</sup>

The emphasis in Chapter 1 is reversed in Chapters 2 and 3 where the texts themselves are examined in more detail. Chapter 2 looks at how the novels foreground the presence of people within landscape and considers how land use shapes the ways it is understood, in particular distinguishing between use and exploitation of the natural world. It notes the portrayals of community and communalism that mark his work and considers how these relate to the ‘taskscape’ which come to form landscape itself.<sup>18</sup> Representations of settlement and ideas about wilderness are explored and some key continuities noted. The chapter also considers some of the literary techniques that work to give the writing its particular force and effect.

Chapter 3 explores themes in the works that correspond to Gunn’s literary activism and to aspects of the political, ethical and aesthetic values evident in the texts. It argues that these are not seen as being distinct from the practical, material business of working land or sea but flow instead from the lived experience of it. The chapter highlights the importance of anarchist ideas in his understanding of past and present society and, linked to this, the importance of sociobiological thinking in his ideas of what is natural and good. The question of what constitutes the ‘natural’ is explored in relation to the salmon motif in his work. This study takes a broad view of the term landscape but while all of the aspects considered here are important others, equally important, could not be included. Although they are alluded to

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<sup>17</sup> T. C. Smout, *Nature Contested: Environmental History of Scotland and Northern England Since 1600* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000) p. 32.

<sup>18</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022) pp. 190-1.

it has not been possible to fully address them. Three, in particular are noted: the gendered nature of Gunn's landscape writing; Gunn's spiritual ideas concerning the natural world, especially Paganism and Zen; the differing ways that sociological, economic and linguistic ideas of the term 'value' overlap and interact in his writing.

The chosen novels are successful and distinctive literary works and their literary qualities carry the weight of their subjects and empower their arguments. The three, set in Sutherland and Caithness, bracket the period from late 1799 to a summer in the mid-1930s. *Butcher's Broom* follows the experience of a small highland community over fifteen years as it and its culture are transformed through processes of clearance and social disintegration. *The Silver Darlings* depicts the lives of those subsequently forced to move east to the coast, there to create new lives dependent upon fishing. It encompasses the period from 1815 to the mid-1830s and describes the precariousness of wresting a living from the northern seas as well as the opportunities for recovery made possible by the newly booming herring fisheries. *Highland River* is set over 28 years of the first decades of the twentieth century and through an examination of the life of its protagonist reflects on the practice and meaning that makes up what Margery McCulloch terms as Gunn's writing of 'essential' Highland experience. Accessible and engaging, this novel is arguably Gunn's most personally reflective fictional work, exploring the reflexive relationship between human and landscape. Other of Gunn's novels, such as *The Grey Coast* and *Morning Tide*, address related themes to those of the primary texts and it is noted later that cases have been made for other groupings of his novels to explain their relationship to each other. However, taken together, the chosen works present a powerful combination of narrative, subject and form that clearly show Gunn's priorities of community and culture and how these come to constitute a conception of landscape. This ability is partly due the duration of the period addressed (effectively the 'Long Nineteenth Century' and beyond) which encompasses the immense economic and social changes with which he is most concerned. The effect is also heightened by *Butcher's Broom* looking to its past as well as its present and *Highland River* to its future, thereby expanding their scope even further. The long span of the novels allows an examination of accumulated changes in the lives of communities as well as noting recurring patterns and continuities. An example of the latter would be theme of population decline, where the military enrolment of

young men in the Napoleonic period, described in *Butcher's Broom*, parallels descriptions of emigration in the 1920s in *The Grey Coast*.<sup>19</sup>

Throughout the decades of this long frame there are constants that run through the writing. These are sometimes recurring and symbolic figures who are more than individual characters but represent positions, interests and sometimes myth. A prominent example is that of the archetypal figure of an old woman which both opens *Butcher's Broom* and re-appears towards the close of *Highland River*, symbolising an inseparable link between human and landscape. Bateman and Purser note how the figure of the 'cailleach' is one which, in the Gaelic tradition, is associated with magic, topography and nature.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, Douglas Gifford refers to the motifs and symbols of serpent and circle that recur within *Highland River* as signifying continuities and cycles. Such interworking of past, present and future is a key theme with landscape understood as being both spatial and temporal: perhaps most obviously in *Highland River* where the Dunbeath Strath can be seen as a chronotope which densely presses together history, myth and lived experience with intimate knowledge and detailed description of place.<sup>21</sup>

Gunn is a writer who vividly stands out for his ability to communicate the essentials of what Tim Ingold describes as a 'dwelling perspective'.<sup>22</sup> This is the idea that 'through living in it, the landscape becomes a part of us, just as we are a part of it'. In this way people are understood as a necessary condition of landscape (as opposed to land). Gunn often alludes to

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<sup>19</sup> Margery McCulloch, *The Novels of Neil M. Gunn: A Critical Study* (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p.5  
*BB*, pp.126-7

Neil M. Gunn, *The Grey Coast* (London: Souvenir Press, 1976), pp.252-3

Neil M. Gunn, *Morning Tide* (London: Souvenir Press, 1975)

<sup>20</sup> Bateman, Purser, *Window to the West* p. 208.

<sup>21</sup> McCulloch, *Novels of Neil Gunn*, p.5

*BB*, p.8

*HR*, p.215

Tim Ingold, 'The Temporality of the landscape' (Routledge: London, 1993) *World Archaeology*, Vol.25. No.2. p.152, p.154.

Douglas Gifford, 'The Source of Joy', in *Neil M. Gunn: The Man and the Writer* ed. by Alexander Scott and Douglas Gifford (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1973) pp. 101-22 (p. 102.)

Russel West-Pavlov, *Temporalities* (London: Routledge), pp.173-4

<sup>22</sup> Tim Ingold, 'The Temporality of the landscape' (Routledge: London, 1993) *World Archaeology*, Vol.25. No.2. p.154.



this in his fiction but it is also present in letters, essays and articles: a typical example being ‘Caithness and Sutherland’ where he states:

it is necessary to get some understanding of the forces, human and economic [...] in order to appreciate even the scenery in which he (sic) lives now. For not only does the environment shape human development, but human development in its turn affects environment.<sup>23</sup>

Gary Backhaus suggests that the term ‘landscape’ resists being pinned down, particularly as at its broadest it can simply be a list of objects or biological systems so inclusive as to have limited practical meaning. At the same time the process of making it comprehensible requires some shaping. In this work it is used in the sense of something that has aspects or forms, almost invariably overlapping, which can be actual and concrete or imagined and abstract. Landscape can encompass physical topography and all the forms of life, plant and animal, it holds within it and can exist as a site of history, myth, memory and imagination. In the context of Gunn’s fiction, it can be helpful to think of these in terms of three dimensions: the mythopoetic; the socio-historic; the ecological. These are not discrete categories but are overlapping and fluid. In addition, George Giarchi’s development of Gerard Manley Hopkins’ idea of ‘inscape’ and Tim Ingold’s conception of how landscape is perceived also help consider how in the novels the external world becomes internalised and vice versa.<sup>24</sup>

Meg Bateman’s exposition of a traditional Highland conception of landscape as a culturally specific space is one apparent in Gunn’s fiction. Two aspects are especially relevant. The first is the significant differentiation made in traditional Gaelic culture between land that is

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<sup>23</sup> Neil M Gunn, ‘Caithness and Sutherland’ in *Landscape to Light*, ed. by Alistair McCleery and Diarmid Gunn, (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2009), p.10.

<sup>24</sup> Gary Backhaus, ‘Introduction’ in Gary Backhaus, John Murungi, eds. *Symbolic Landscapes* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), ebook, <doi-org.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1007/978-1-4020-8703-5> [accessed 8 June 2021] (3-12)

George Giarchi, *Between McAlpine and Polaris* (Thetford: Thetford Press, 1984), p.12.

Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, pp. 23-4.

John Parham, ‘Ways of Understanding Nature: Ecology in Hopkins’ Intellectual Formation’, *Nature, Culture and Literature*, 6 (2010), 99-144 <<http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/ways-understanding-nature-ecology-hopkins/docview/755255604/se-2>> [accessed 29 September 2023] (pp.129-31).

cultivated and wilderness. It reflects the nature of the topography and the sharp contrast in character which exists between arable low-lying, fertile parks or cultivated strips and the harsh unproductive uplands and moorland bog. The former represents a kinder, amenable environment where homes and communities can exist and the latter as being outwith the domain of human management. The second point is the particular focus that traditional conceptions place on the imaginative and mythic elements of landscape. These denote physical locations as sites of mythological events or presence and are signified through associated names and legend. Through this, landscape itself is seen as being animate. References to this understanding are common in Gunn's work, where special places are represented as having their own agency or can be experienced spiritually.<sup>25</sup> Certain people and animals are represented as possessing 'second sight' and having abilities that are embedded in a form of knowledge very different from that of both classical and Christian belief: challenging 'the Aristotelian view that man is the nearest to God at the top of the pyramid of animals, and different from the Christian model of an inanimate earth on which a transcendent God creates animals and man'.<sup>26</sup> In this other conception two landscapes exist and interact reflecting Gunn's idea of both a material and a non-material world coexisting together, 'The two worlds, the world known to man and the otherworld glimpsed in the wilderness, are two ways of seeing our world, the one from our socio-historical perspective, the other mythopoetically, from the timeless perspective of the natural forces of death and regeneration'.<sup>27</sup>

The socio-historical perspective of landscape is present in Gunn's discussion of the critical role of the Clearances. These events permeate much of Gunn's work and while their immediate consequences are the particular focus of *Butcher's Broom*, debates about longer-term effects and the cultural implications of matters such as eviction, land ownership and usage provide the foundations of many of his novels and essays. Gunn also draws attention to

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<sup>25</sup> For example the 'House of Peace' in *HR*

<sup>26</sup> Meg Bateman, 'The Landscape of the Gaelic Imagination' in *International Journal of Heritage Studies*, 15:2-3, (2009) pp.142-152, <doi.org/10.1080/13527250902890613> [accessed 4 February 2022] (144-6)

<sup>27</sup> Gary Backhaus, 'Introduction' in Gary Backhaus, John Murungi, eds. *Symbolic Landscapes* (Dordrecht: Springer, 2009), ebook, <doi-org.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1007/978-1-4020-8703-5> [accessed 16 March 2020] pp.3-12.  
Neil M. Gunn, 'On Magic' in *Landscape to Light* (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2009) pp.75-6

the vulnerability of the Sutherland and Caithness population through his examination of its dependency on its small number of industries where, through the example of fishing, he suggests ‘on the Caithness coast the whole tidal process of economics can be studied from end to end.’ Novels such as *The Silver Darlings* and *Morning Tide* draw heavily upon family and community experience of herring fishing and this engagement is evident in essays which explore the industry’s history, challenges and potential solutions.<sup>28</sup>

The novels’ ecological landscapes reflect Gunn’s distinctive personal knowledge of the natural world. This emphasises tacit knowledge before formal learning and, while one does not necessarily exclude the other, it is interesting to contrast his writing with that of John Muir, who often combined a lyrical and spiritual dimension with more scientific observations and Latin nomenclature. Gunn however prioritises experience, both individual and communal, ‘In boyhood we get to know every square yard of it [Dunbeath Strath]. We encompass it physically and our memories hold it.’<sup>29</sup> Both writers share a deep sense of intimacy and engagement with their landscapes but Gunn writes as a native who experiences it through the shared history and culture of those who have inhabited it over a long duration. Gunn’s ecological landscapes therefore are bound up with the processes of daily living, frequently presented through everyday pleasures such as the eating of food obtained from the land or sea. While the essays and novels may not use terms such as biodiversity collapse or environmental depredation to discuss the introduction of industrial agriculture or the sporting estate they are always concerned with the sustainability and balance that provides people with the means to live through the land.

This way of apprehending the world is evident in his representation of how the personal, social and natural worlds interact: where changes in one impacts upon the others. In this

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<sup>28</sup> Gunn, ‘My Bit of Britain’, *LL*, p.21.

NMG, ‘The Wonder Story of the Moray Firth’, 2009, *LL* p.30.

NMG, ‘The Family Boat’ in Neil M. Gunn, *Belief in Ourselves* (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2010) p. 40.

<sup>29</sup> John Muir, *A Thousand Mile Walk to the Gulf*, in *The Wilderness Journeys*, series ed. by Roderick Watson (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997), pp. 98-9

Neil M. Gunn, ‘My Bit of Britain’, in *Landscape to Light*, ed. by Alastair McCleery and Diarmid Gunn (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2009), p.24

scheme of things, the three novels can be seen as representations of the disruption resulting from the shock of the rapid introduction of capitalist agriculture to the Highlands and there is a consistent pattern running through these novels in that he first examines the impact of a significant event before then considering how characters adapt to and subsequently integrate it.<sup>30</sup> Alongside this, his protagonists strive to retain and draw upon what he considers to be the best of their way of life. Gunn often refers to this as traditional life and presents it as constituting a range of behaviours, rituals and beliefs. These may often be seemingly small, unremarkable things but they are presented with such lingering attention and detail that they are revealed to represent both themselves and much more.

With themes of displacement, migration and alienation in his writing it is not hard to see parallels with later events of the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> centuries. Patterns of land ownership, the effects of species decline, and the migration of young people from the Highlands all continue to resonate. It is important however to acknowledge that what it now means to ‘dwell’ in the Highlands differs in important ways from Gunn’s representations and there are dilemmas associated with this. Alistair McIntosh notes, for example, the complexities of resisting cultural decline in the context of a changing population profile where those with longstanding Highland ‘roots’ may be in the minority.<sup>31</sup> While such changes are acknowledged there are sufficient continuities to rebuff the view that an ecocritical interpretation of his work would be anachronistic. As Richard Kerridge states, ‘...ecocriticism seeks to evaluate texts and ideas in terms of their coherence and usefulness as responses to environmental crises’, and Gunn’s work offers a rich source of discussion and ideas for examination. This is not to suggest a nostalgic return to some organic peasant society but rather to consider how to maintain the presence of people on the land through use of the opportunities and technologies that have become available. All three of the novels consider how their communities can survive and all demonstrate or advocate ways of adapting and maintaining their existence in the face of economic and cultural challenges. This forms a large part of the drama Gunn creates in his stories. His commitment to this is demonstrated in his activism and writing with regard to

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<sup>30</sup> T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Clearances: A History of the Dispossessed* (London: Allen Lane, 2018), pp.139-41.

<sup>31</sup> Alistair McIntosh, ‘Foreword’ in *On the Other Side of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands* by James Hunter (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2022), p.28. ebook

such things as the sustainment of crofting, the development of hydroelectricity production and the impact of the tourism and sporting industries. It is notable that his handling of these topics generally comes from a position that foregrounds the interaction between the economic and the social but which always remains rooted in the geographical, cultural and historical.<sup>32</sup>

The novels' focus upon those who lived during and in the aftermath of the Clearances helps the lived experience of the past be brought into contemporary debate. Through their representations of traditional life they allow comparisons with positions that have since become accepted as normal or even desirable. In this way the status quo can be questioned. Within the context of Gunn's interests, a notable example concerns the depopulated landscapes of the glens. In *Highland River* Gunn describes Kenn's thoughts as he encounters the ruins of houses on his walk to the source of the Dunbeath Water. These express to him a sense of the absence of their occupants but, more powerfully, a presence, continuity and connection to those generations who had lived there over many centuries. His experience contrasts strongly with the more prevalent perception of the Highlands described by Andrew Blaikie who notes that, '... the iconography of Scottish landscape overwhelmingly consists of images of empty places that are distant from where most Scots live'.<sup>33</sup> Blaikie's comment illustrates the difference between the meaning of this landscape to those who dwelled there and the dominant imagery of Scotland itself, deriving from the idea of the picturesque and held by many Scots from outside that particular culture region. His remark highlights how this conception of Scotland is characterised by representations of places which are far removed from the reality of the people who live there.

Both Gunn's fiction and non-fiction demonstrate the significance he placed on the land rights of indigenous Highland people and the disastrous consequences that followed when these

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<sup>32</sup>Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, (London: Routledge, 2012), p.4.

F. R. Hart and J. B. Pick, *Neil M. Gunn: A Highland Life* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1985), pp.180-2, p.235.

Neil M. Gunn, *Off in a Boat* (New York: New Amsterdam, 1990), p.70-1.

<sup>33</sup> Andrew Blaikie, *The Scots Imagination and Modern Memory* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013), p. 137. *HR*, pp.227-8.

were overturned. The enduring nature of these concerns is noted by Ewan Cameron when he states in relation to the period from the late nineteenth century onward, that ‘The land question has remained in the bloodstream of Scottish politics and in the cultural memory of Scotland.’<sup>34</sup> Cameron cites Gunn as part of an enduring literary tradition that has addressed this. The timescale referred to by Cameron brackets that of Gunn’s life, throughout which the land issue is presented by him as unresolved. In thinking about this it is useful to consider how concepts of land ownership, cultural expressions and environmentalism are linked. Christopher Smout’s history of the roots of what he terms ‘Green Consciousness’ in the Highlands points to evidence of its existence in the eighteenth-century poetry of Duncan Ban McIntyre where Green Consciousness is characterised by ideas of both utility and beauty which are defined by their cultural context. Smout contrasts this with southern conceptions of the Highlands which until this period focussed upon their productive value and argues that each age constructs its own conception of nature. He notes the shift in thinking from the position in the seventeenth century, where understanding of use and delight were difficult to separate, through subsequent years where they became more distinguished and then to the twentieth century where they often existed in conflict with one other. Louisa Gairn traces the changes in feelings for nature that can be seen in Victorian Highland Scotland as the Romantic idea of landscape, influencing a largely passive onlooker, began to change to one of a more embodied form of engagement. She highlights the role of John Veitch as both philosopher and mountaineer to illustrate how a relationship based more upon physical engagement developed, something which encompassed both the ‘aesthetic and athletic’.<sup>35</sup> Such thinking is influential in how the Highlands increasingly become a playground for members of the middle and upper classes and in turn the sporting estate forms the focus for much of Gunn’s writing of alienation from the land. Smout similarly notes this emphasis upon the amenity function of the Highlands but he also identifies how ideas of usage and value have continued to develop in the twentieth century as its ecological function in areas such as carbon capture and flood management are newly recognised.

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<sup>34</sup> Ewan A. Cameron, ‘Still on the Agenda? The Strange Survival of the Scottish Land Question, 1880–1999’, in *Land Reform in Scotland*, ed. by M. Combe, J. Glass and A. Tindley (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), p.109. pp.109-113. Ebook.

<sup>35</sup> Louisa Gairn, ‘Ecology and Scottish Literature’ (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2008), p. 20.

James Hunter argues for the existence of a Green Consciousness over a much longer timescale.<sup>36</sup> He points to a range of older cultural texts and argues for the distinctiveness of the Highlands in comparison with the rest of Scotland. Hunter notes both the urgency of achieving Highland economic stability and the environmental importance of its landscapes and regrets the often-embittered disputes that result between their different supporters. Smout characterises this as partly a conflict between growth and aesthetics.<sup>37</sup> A useful insight into current trends of thinking can be seen in what is happening in the land market in Scotland where high demand is resulting in ‘record’ price increases and ‘Investors interested in carbon offsetting, planting forestry, renewables and rewilding are increasingly competing with lifestyle and sporting buyers’.<sup>38</sup> By highlighting the lasting consequences of the Clearances, human and environmental, Gunn’s writing echoes the position of contemporary Highland campaigners about whom Magnus Davidson comments, ‘Their environmentalism is rooted in a centuries-long desire for social justice. Environmentalism that does not deal with social inequality ... is not good environmentalism.’<sup>39</sup> The forms may be new but much of the process remains the same and Gunn’s fictional accounts of exclusion anticipate deep rooted and enduring problems.

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<sup>36</sup> Hunter, *OSS*, pp.12 – 3.

<sup>37</sup> T. C. Smout, ‘The Highlands and the Roots of Green Consciousness: 1750-1990\*’ in *Exploring Environmental History: Selected Essays* by T.C. Smout (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 2012), 1-27 p.1. ebook. DOI: 10.3366/edinburgh/9780748635139.001.0001.

<sup>38</sup> Rob McMorran, James Glendinning and Jayne Glass, *Rural Land Market Insights Report: A report to the Scottish Land Commission* (Scottish Land Commission, 2022) 1 – 58

<[<sup>39</sup> Magnus Davidson, ‘Repeopling Scotland’, \*Reforesting Scotland\*, 64, Autumn/Winter 2021, <https://reforestingscotland.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/10/Repeopling.pdf> \[accessed 17 June 2023\] \(p.13.\)](https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/62543b9498bb1_Rural%20Land%20Market%20Insights%20Report%20April%202022.pdf#:~:text=High%20demand%20has%20resulted%20in%20farmland%20values%20rising,values%20%28all%20and%20types%29%20in%20Scotland%20of%20C2%A35%2C920.> [accessed 19 March 2022] (p. 23.)</a></p>
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## Chapter 1

### Landscapes and Inscapes

This chapter sets out the conceptual framework that underpins the reading of the novels and highlights some of the continuing social and environmental issues evident within them. It suggests that the novels highlight the role of the local, especially the local past, and that this provides modern readers with opportunities to consider what has changed, what has remained the same and what might be learned from such comparisons. The chapter begins by acknowledging the ecological context of the early twenty-first century and affirms why ecocritical readings of texts should form part of its wider debate. It moves on to look at the particular period during which Gunn was active, how his geographical address shaped his writing and considers how some of his concerns have continued to influence events. It includes the complex of interests which are shaped by factors such as ownership, residence and the economic relationships which links them to particular places. This is followed by consideration of some critical perspectives of Gunn's work and discussion of the literary forms used in the novels. The final section considers how the experience of landscape and place combine to create an internal inscape.

### A Starting Point

The ecological context of the early twenty-first century is almost unrecognisable from that which existed in the mid-1930s and early 1940s, the period when the novels considered here were written. However, those years marked the beginning of a time when the pace of environmental depredation not only increased it also changed in character with the onset of irrecoverable damage caused by pollution.<sup>40</sup> The publication of *Silent Spring* in 1962 was a

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<sup>40</sup> Rachel Carson, *Silent Spring*, (London: Penguin Books, 2000) p.23, p.31.



landmark point in the development of awareness of the scope and scale of emerging ecological threats but, in the period of Gunn's novel writing, there was little sense of the impending crises of climate change and species collapse which began to emerge in the years following his death in 1973. Instead, environmental concerns in those decades were framed by what became the accelerating pattern of twentieth century land use, the conflict between economic growth and what was largely, but not wholly, middle class amenity. Ecological concerns have increasingly generated corresponding cultural debate and in Scotland much of this converges around issues which are often gathered under the headings of land reform and management. Gunn's novels, with their focus upon the fundamentals of community and place, resonate strongly with these and remind readers of the long chain of connected historical events that lie behind their modern forms.<sup>41</sup>

In the face of the magnitude and complexity of twenty-first century environmental crises, the ecocritical study of literary fiction might appear to have limited relevance. However, there still remains the potential to remedy, mitigate and prevent harm and ecocritical readings, as one element of wider, proactive critical studies, not only contribute to the examination and understanding of possible actions they also serve to encourage a more fundamental reconsideration of the relationship between people and the wider natural world. Such an engagement should extend beyond the hard sciences to include the cultural sphere and as Greg Garrard argues:

In addition to the clever technologies, wily policies and ethical revaluations that we need to respond to environmental crises we shall need better, less anthropomorphic metaphors. That is the project and promise of eco-criticism.<sup>42</sup>

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(*Silent Spring* was first published in America in 1962)

<sup>41</sup> Gairn, *EMSL*, p. 125.

The Scottish Government, 'Climate Ready Scotland: climate change adaptation programme 2019-2024', <<https://www.gov.scot/publications/climate-ready-scotland-second-scottish-climate-change-adaptation-programme-2019-2024/>> [accessed 18.2.22]

The Ministerial Foreword on the first page contains a headline summary of points.

Scottish Natural Heritage, 'State of Nature Report Scotland' 2019 (The State of Nature Partnership, 2019)

<<https://nbn.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/09/State-of-nature-Report-2019-Scotland-full-report.pdf>> [accessed 5.11.19]

The initial summary provides a precis of trends and levels of environmental degradation.

<sup>42</sup> Greg Garrard, 'Ecocriticism' 2<sup>nd</sup> edn, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 205.

Writing in the context of literary teaching, Christopher Hitt argues that most eco-critics would probably characterise their work as having an ethical and political dimension and suggests that questions about its relationship to 'real life' are relevant and to be invited. He argues that by showing how 'reading and analyzing are intertwined with ethics we build a bridge between the past and the present.'<sup>43</sup>

The novels considered here originate from part of the period of twentieth-century modernism characterised by manifestos and ideologies but, while Gunn declares both his socialism and nationalism, much of the activism in his fiction is directed towards the promotion of everyday humanistic values rather than wider grand narratives, several of which he challenges in his novels, essays and letters.<sup>44</sup> At the same time, however, they highlight the types of knowledge and understanding of wider social forces regarded as necessary if parallels with the events described in *Butcher's Broom* are to be avoided.<sup>45</sup> Part of the novels' value is that they fulfil the role highlighted by Jonathan Bate where 'Telling stories is the characteristically human way of humanizing the big questions' and while Gunn's pictures of traditional Highland life can be criticized as sometimes idealized, these stories still have value as:

the myth of a better life that has gone is no less important for being myth rather than history. Myths are necessary imaginings, exemplary stories which help our species make sense of the world.<sup>46</sup>

In her examination of the evolution of the term, Louisa Gairn notes that ecology has changed from being a reductionist, biological science to signifying a fluid and reflexive relationship

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<sup>43</sup> Christopher Hitt, 'Ecocriticism and the Long Eighteenth Century' in *College Literature* (The John Hopkins University Press) Vol. 31 No3 (summer, 2004), pp. 123-147 (p. 125)

<sup>44</sup> Neil M. Gunn, 'Scotland a Nation', in Alistair McCleery and Dairmid Gunn eds., *Belief in Ourselves*, (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2010), pp.24-7.

<sup>45</sup> Gunn, *Butcher's Broom*, pp. 21-2.

<sup>46</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth*, (London: Picador, 2000), p.25.

Margery McCulloch, *The Novels of Neil M. Gunn: A Critical Study*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press, 1987), p.81-2

between organisms and their environment. She notes the trend within ecological theory which suggests a shift away from the dualistic split between the thinking self and the embodied substance: an idea which previously provided the foundational argument for the ‘objectivity of science and the abstraction from historicity, location, nature, and culture.’<sup>47</sup> This challenges the idea of the individual as separate from their environment and stresses not only the embodied nature of how the world is experienced but also how we are continually shaped and reshaped by it.<sup>48</sup> This idea is illustrated in the opening pages of *Butcher’s Broom* which describe a sequence of sensations, interactions and movement. The result is a combining of moods, lore, lists of natural objects and lyrical description of seasons and weather which coalesce to suggest a complex system in which human and non-human elements are inseparable:

when good weather has newly come, how the sea brims and sways and breathes its sweet fragrance on the air! This morning, too, there had been the extra exhilaration of autumn, that indescribable quickening that the skin takes in a shiver. (*BB*, p.8)

In the passage the physicality of both landscape and its human participant dominates and suggests that they are aspects of a connected whole. The animate sea sways and breathes. Skin quickens and shivers. This suggests more than that the character is simply moving through an environment but instead points towards a more complex relationship where the human emerges out of their interaction with it and that any separation between the self and the surrounding world is blurred:

The old woman stood on the Darras, the doorway between the bright sea and the dark hills; and when at last she turned from the sea and lifted her burden to her back, the door closed behind her. But the vacant glimmer remained in her eyes

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<sup>47</sup> Gairn, *Ecology and Scottish Literature*, p. 6.

Michael Serres, quoted in Gairn, p.6.

<sup>48</sup> Tim Ingold, *Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill*, (London: Taylor and Francis, 2000) p.19. ebook.

and they held their stare until the valley began to pour slowly into them its dark comfort. (*BB*, p. 7)

These lines imply that in the animate landscape is the more active element, as first sea and then valley exert their influence over the old woman. The earlier use in the chapter of the metaphor of the shore to show its agency gives further weight to this idea, suggesting that this is not something temporary, such as a passing mood or apprehension.<sup>49</sup> Instead, it is implied that aspects of personal identity and temperament can have their origins in particular locations and environments. In the case of the old woman, this is signalled through linking a characteristic of mind with the physical characteristics of the location of her childhood, ‘for she had been born by the sea, and the sea-water readily curls over and breaks on the shore of the mind’ (*BB*, p. 7).

This idea of being open and receptive to the natural world is developed further as Gunn expands his description of the old woman and makes reference to her ‘staring-blind’ and having ‘blindness’ in her expression (*BB*, p. 9). In the lines immediately following, the text conveys ideas about aspects of knowledge and intelligence and uses landscape terms to provide its language of expression and point towards a mystical element in its relationship with the old woman herself. It begins by noting how the appearance of ‘blindness’, here signifying an absence of conscious thought, creates an impression of unintelligence and suggests that she appears to be little more than an unthinking person. However, from the reader is aware that the old woman is a healer who possesses skill and knowledge. Her apparent lack of conscious thought is therefore reframed in the text as a way of intuitively being, something essential and akin to landscape itself. This is taken further through implying magical and mythic aspects that, with references to lore and moving underground, are suggestive of the otherworld of the Tuatha De Danann, ‘in her steady unthinking darkness, she might have walked out of a mountain and might walk into it again, leaving no sign’ (*BB*, p. 10).

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<sup>49</sup> *BB*, p.7.

Blindness here implies mythical references to blind seers, possessors of a special form of sight, and it is through the eyes that the landscape ‘pours’ into her (*BB*, p. 7).<sup>50</sup>

Gunn often considers conceptions of knowledge in terms of the potential for conflict between the subjective, tacit understanding of an indigenous people and the ‘objective’, analytic rationalism of outsiders. An exchange in *Butcher’s Broom* between characters standing for historical figures of the Clearances demonstrates, through their references to sheep breeding and feed production, how new knowledge of market economics and livestock farming provide the rationale for the coming radical change in how land is conceived and managed.<sup>51</sup> Like the opening passage noted above it is full of detail and depth but its purpose is very different and in highlighting this Gunn contrasts humane indigenous knowledge, associated with healing and sustenance, with outsiders’ materialist knowledge, which is bound up with displacement and disruption.

While the importance of such a conflict of ideas in the context of Highland society in the industrial transformations of the late eighteenth century may be apparent, its subsequent relevance might not. However, different forms of these issues continue to arise. In her study of land use conflict in the Cairngorms in the late 1990s and early 2000s, Bonnie Vandesteeg notes how prioritisation of scientific, academic knowledge over practical, local knowledge, derived from working on the land, caused resentment among sections of local people to ‘outsiders’ from conservation bodies who cite such knowledge as the basis for their authority regarding land ownership and use.<sup>52</sup> The status of these different forms of knowledge is highly contested and their validity, or otherwise, is not only used to advocate particular positions but also to undermine and denigrate perceived opponents. These disputes may not be couched in the overtly contemptuous language used in *Butcher’s Broom*, where Highlanders are referred to as ‘utterly ignorant’ and ‘unlearned’ but it is notable that the characterisation of a section of contemporary inhabitants as lacking understanding or concern for the

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<sup>50</sup> Bateman, *WW*: pp.45-6.

<sup>51</sup> *BB*, pp.163-4.

<sup>52</sup> Bonnie Vandesteeg, *Land for What? Land for Whom?* (Stormy Petrel, 2021), pp.270-1., p.181, p.176.

environment is similarly employed by some conservationists to suggest that the locals cannot be entrusted with its management.<sup>53</sup>

## Gunn's Perspective

It is now fifty years since the death of Neil Miller Gunn, almost one hundred since he wrote his first novel, *The Grey Coast*, and approaching seventy since the publication of *The Other Landscape*, his last.<sup>54</sup> His lifetime encompassed huge societal changes and included the advent of the nuclear age and the 'Great Acceleration', the period from the 1950s when the exploitation of natural resources increased exponentially.<sup>55</sup> The passage of these years place readers of Gunn today at an intriguing point in time. There are people alive today who knew Gunn and whose first-hand knowledge provides a direct sense of connection to him. For many the period of our own lives still overlaps with his. He himself was born in the late nineteenth century and grew up amongst people who had lived through the later Highland Clearances. This enables Gunn to write from a position of experience and insight to historical events of the nineteenth century but still have direct connections to the twenty-first century.

His engagement with the intimate detail of Highland life in his own time and his understanding of how it links with the communal past is exemplified in his writing about the fishing industry.<sup>56</sup> In both essays and novels Gunn explores not only the broad narratives of the

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<sup>53</sup> James Hunter, *The Other Side of Sorrow: Nature and People in the Scottish Highlands* (Edinburgh: Mainstream Publishing, 1995), p.15.

*B.B.* p.159.

<sup>54</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *The Grey Coast* (London: Souvenir Press, 1976).

Neil M. Gunn, *The Other Landscape* (Glasgow: Richard Drew, 1988).

<sup>55</sup> Simon L. Lewis & Mark A. Maslin, 'Defining the Anthropocene' *Nature* Vol 519 12 March 2015 (MacMillan Publishers Ltd.) <doi:10.1038/nature14258.> [accessed 10 September 2023] (pp. 176-7)

<sup>56</sup> F.R. Hart and J.B. Pick, *Neil Gunn: A Highland Life*, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1981), p.19.

industry but also the particularities of its economic and social characteristics. An example of this links two pieces of writing. In his article ‘The Family Boat, Its Future in Scottish Fishing’ Gunn notes that the welcome development of north-east council housing regrettably overlooks an important factor for those working the fishing boats:

‘The fishermen move in but now they find they have no lofts and outside sheds for storing gear, painting boys or mending nets. ... Result - they have to pay for storing their gear.’<sup>57</sup>

The financial precariousness of a living obtained from making and maintaining nets a hundred years earlier is fictionally explored in *The Silver Darlings* where the school teacher explains to those gathered with him how a net maker has to tie 3,789 knots to earn 1d.<sup>58</sup> These aspects of the lives of fisherfolk are not immediately obvious to those outwith that world but they are significant and uncover something easily overlooked. Such insights give the texts a weight and a sense of having a grasp of their subject. They also situate the minutiae of day-to-day living within broader social and economic contexts. Both are concerned with the relationship between the local and the wider world and both aim to increase understanding: the former through highlighting the consequences for local people of misunderstanding or indifference to local need and the latter through showing why fishing industry workers need to understand the economic relations that shape their lives. Something which has enduring relevance.<sup>59</sup>

Also prominent in the writing is an awareness of the sensitive balance between the economy of the local fishing communities and the environment which provides their livelihood. Its vulnerability is highlighted in ‘The Family Boat’ where Gunn refers to the ‘slaughter of

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<sup>57</sup> Neil M. Gunn, ‘The Family Boat, Its Future in Scottish Fishing’ in Alistair McCleery, ed., *Belief in Ourselves*, (Dunbeath: Whittles, 2010) p.41.

<sup>58</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *The Silver Darlings* (London: Faber and Faber, 1969), pp. 178-80.

<sup>59</sup> Rebekah McVey, ‘‘It’s like a motorway crash’: Urgent meeting sought to resolve Brexit mess which has left fishing industry suffering huge losses’, *The Press and Journal*, 11 January, 2021, < <https://www.pressandjournal.co.uk/fp/news/aberdeen-aberdeenshire/2801383/its-like-a-motorway-crash-urgent-meeting-sought-to-resolve-brexit-mess-which-has-left-fishing-industry-suffering-huge-losses/> > [accessed 26.2.22]

immature fish' potentially resulting in species decline through overfishing.<sup>60</sup> The issue has a long history and similar arguments about species sustainability and the viability of the industry a hundred years earlier are the subject of dialogue between curers in *The Silver Darlings* where the temptations of short-term gain are contrasted with anxiety over long-term security.<sup>61</sup> By highlighting issues such as these Gunn demonstrates his concern about the danger of short-term thinking disrupting both community and ecological balance. They also show that these problems have long roots which need to be understood. His novels contrast the passing benefits of the exploitation of natural resources with the less obvious negative environmental consequences and points towards examples of traditional knowledge that offer alternatives.

This technique is seen towards the conclusion of *The Drinking Well*. In a discussion of the condition of the hill sheep-farming industry Gunn, in typical fashion, considers its history, uses examples to identify problems and then proposes solutions.<sup>62</sup> It is notable that his protagonist refers to the source for his own knowledge as a poem of 1804 which includes notes that address the issue of overgrazing and specifies the optimum ratio of livestock for the maintenance of pasture as being 'Two black cattle to every twenty sheep' (*BB*, p. 498).<sup>63</sup> Again, although a detail, the reference is significant. It affirms that the relevant knowledge that the new landlord seeks is held in a poem, a cultural production and it shows that this knowledge is possessed by a local rather than an outsider. These small examples work cumulatively to help invert assumptions about who holds knowledge and who can claim the power of its authority.

This attention to the detail of people's lives is based on personal and family experience as well as observation and research.<sup>64</sup> It provides a foundation for the novels but readings are

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<sup>60</sup> Gunn, *The Family Boat*, p.41.

<sup>61</sup> *SD*, pp.3510-1.

<sup>62</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *The Drinking Well*, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2006), pp.497-9.

<sup>63</sup> Alexander Campbell, 'The Grampians Desolate: A Poem', in *Internet Archive* < <https://archive.org/details/grampiansdesola00campgoog> > [accessed 14.3.22] p. 287. The line referred to is on p.287 of the original book but appears as p.296 of the digitised production.

<sup>64</sup> Diarmid Gunn, 'Introduction, in Neil M. Gunn, *Highland River*, (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1996), p.vii-xii.



enhanced by the numerous articles which contextualise them. These essays work as sets of parallel notes which broaden and deepen the novels' meanings and place their themes in wider contexts. The recurring concern with displacement from the land provides an example. In the novels this idea is used to convey not only the material sense of having to remove from one location to another but to encompass the totality of destruction of the social relations that had existed within the community. As with the fishing and crofting related themes, the novels work collectively to consider the continuity of this issue over time. In *Butcher's Broom* the account of the evicted Highlanders' journey to the coast focusses upon the factor's action of forbidding the offering of shelter by the un-evicted to the evicted, on pain of their own removal, 'Of all that happened at this time, this denial of hospitality was the most bitter and destroying for it struck not merely at the body but at the living root of the spirit' (*BB*, p. 376-7).

The forbidding of an expression of mutual support represents both a ruthless determination to complete the evictions and the undermining of practices that might challenge landlords' control. Hostility to Highland mutualism and self-determination with regard to how basic needs such as food and shelter are met can be seen as having expression in the earlier Statutes of Iona which similarly attempt to restrict these.<sup>65</sup> Gunn alludes to this in *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* where the Coastwatcher uses the imperative case to insist to Art and Hector that 'each night you will stay at an Inn. You will follow this road and not leave it, nor eat what you may see'.<sup>66</sup> Both are suggestive of a process whereby people are forced to become alienated from each other as well as from the produce of the landscape around them. This diametrically contrasts with what Alastair McIntosh describes as the 'vernacular Highland economy', conceived as one where people felt and acted as responsible for one another.<sup>67</sup>

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F.R. Hart and J. B. Pick, *Neil M. Gunn, A highland Life*, (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1981), pp.103-4.

<sup>65</sup> Michael Newton, ed., 'Statutes of Iona', in *Exploring Celtic Civilizations*, <<https://exploringcelticiv.web.unc.edu/statutes-of-iona/>> [accessed 22.3.22) Statutes II, III and IV refer.

<sup>66</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2006), p.21.

<sup>67</sup> Alastair McIntosh, *Soil and Soul*, (London: Aurum Press, 2004), p.29.

Similarly, an earlier work but set a century or so later, *The Grey Coast* also addresses the issue of forced migration as Ivor, an impoverished likely descendent of the evicted and in a state of anger and despair, considers emigrating to Canada, something that Gunn had knowledge of as three of his brothers had done so prior to their deaths in WWI.<sup>68</sup> Hart and Pick note how Gunn imaginatively balanced family experience of adversity and danger with the resilience provided by family, place and memory, something considered in the *Highland River* encounter between Kenn and Angus in the trenches.<sup>69</sup> Ivor too refers to the shared experience of a desperate community: ‘And of this communal life, Ivor felt himself a unit among the dying’, the term unit emphasising the stripping away of individuality.<sup>70</sup> The points are forcefully made in the novels but the subjective meanings they offer are enhanced through their relationship with other writing that connects them to wider debates.

In the case of novels such as *Butcher’s Broom* this can be seen by linking it to Gunn’s discussion of depopulation in ‘... and then Rebuild It’ with subsequent Highlands and Islands Enterprise’s area profiles of Caithness and Sutherland and with James Hunter’s ‘Repeopling Empty Places’.<sup>71</sup> Recognition of the link between the novels and the wider related literature concerning land reform affirms the connection between the cultural and the political and establishes Gunn’s works as a significant part of that tradition.<sup>72</sup> It is, in fact, a continuance of the approach Gunn himself utilised. This mixing of storytelling and analysis allows Gunn to be both recent and historical, offering an opportunity to apply historical perspectives to narratives created by an author who has drawn upon the authority of lived experience and the concerns of the period. In this way historical events, such as the commodification of land,

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<sup>68</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *The Grey Coast*, (London, Faber and Faber, 1976), pp.35-7.

Douglas Gifford, *Gunn and Gibbon*, (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1983), p.13.

<sup>69</sup> Hart, Pick, *NGHL*, p. 21., pp. 94-5.

<sup>70</sup> *GC*, p.39.

<sup>71</sup> Neil M. Gunn, ‘...and then Rebuild It’, in Alistair McCleery, ed., *Belief in Ourselves*, (Dunbeath, Whittles Publishing, 2010), pp.57-62

Highlands and Islands Enterprise, *Highlands and Islands Area Profiles 2020 Caithness and Sutherland*, (HIE)

<https://www.hie.co.uk/media/10590/caithness-area-profile-2020.pdf> online, [accessed 24.3.2022]

James Hunter, *Repeopling Empty Places: Centenary reflections on the significance and the enduring legacy of the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act 1919*, (Scottish Land Commission, 2019)

<sup>72</sup> Ewan A. Cameron, ‘Still on the Agenda’ in Malcolm M. Combe, Jayne Glass and Annie Tindley, eds., *Land Reform in Scotland History, Law and Policy*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020) pp.100-2.

the displacement of people and damaging land usage can be considered as antecedents of modern phenomena such as public interest tests, re-peopling and rewilding.

Gunn, therefore, is a transitional figure who writes as someone shaped by a long communal past, closely engaged with political and social debates of his day, as well as literary ones, and active in shaping future prospects.<sup>73</sup> This sense of being positioned at a point of great social and literary change is symbolised by the fact that he, an author steeped in Gaelic culture and angered at its erosion, was not himself a Gaelic speaker and wrote in English.<sup>74</sup> Some critics have cited his lack of fluent Gaelic as undermining his authority in this regard and Gunn himself recognised the problems it created.<sup>75</sup>

However, that very loss of language arguably strengthens the case for considering him as someone who consciously chose to engage with that culture and who was acutely aware of how changes, such as Gaelic's decline, were eroding traditional life.<sup>76</sup> His inability to speak the language meant that he could not so easily experience or take for granted aspects that would have been intuitively understood by earlier Gaelic-speaking generations. Margery McCulloch suggests that while for many a nation's language is a 'hallmark' of national identity, Gunn understood:

that identity goes beyond language to shared cultural traditions and social patterns developed over long periods of time: to our relationship with our natural

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<sup>73</sup> F. R. Hart, J. B. Pick, *Neil M. Gunn: A Highland Life* (London: John Murray, 1985), p.110, p.181, p.233.

These refer to Gunn's involvement in political and public life (Scottish National Party, Committee on Post-War Hospital problems in Scotland, Commission of Inquiry into Crofting Conditions).

<sup>74</sup> Neil M. Gunn, 'The Gael Will Come Again', in *Belief in Ourselves*, (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, p.30).

This refers to the first two paragraphs.

<sup>75</sup> For example, Christopher Whyte, 'Fishy Masculinities' in the author ed. *Gendering the Nation; Studies in Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) pp.49-68.

Neil Gunn, *Off in a Boat* (New York: New Amsterdam, 1990) p. 180.

<sup>76</sup> Neil Gunn, 'The Gael Will Come Again' in *Belief in Ourselves* (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing), p.29.

environment and to the complex of ideas about human life which has gradually evolved from the coming together of varied yet related living experiences.<sup>77</sup>

John Murray/Iain Moireach suggests that considering the Anglophone Gunn as a writer of the Gaelic world might seem surprising but he too cites the relationship of the texts to the framework of myth, tradition and the Gaelic way of conceiving the land which is manifested in the structure of the language itself. Murray argues that Gunn's writing in English, both stylistically and in its concepts, can be linked to older lyrical and poetic work in Gaelic.<sup>78</sup> As an author he is, in this way, insider and outsider: positioned to write about close and distanced events and possessing a facility to encourage comparisons by linking different cultures and periods. This enables the novels to convey a deep sense of the local past which still resonates with the contemporary forms of those same persisting debates: most prominently the control of land.<sup>79</sup> This issue, with its related train of economic and social consequences, defines novels such as *Butcher's Broom* and *The Silver Darlings*, and prominently situates Gunn as one for whom the Highland Clearances and their consequences represent unfinished business: not detached historical events but key structural influences active in shaping Highland life today.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>77</sup> Margery McCulloch, 'Introduction', in Neil M. Gunn, *Highland Pack* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1991), p.2.

<sup>78</sup> John Murray/Iain Moireach, *Literature if the Gaelic Landscape* (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2017), pp.vii-viii.

<sup>79</sup> Scottish Land Commission, *Legislative proposals to address the impact of Scotland's concentration of land ownership*, <[https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/601acfc4ea58a\\_Legislative%20proposals%20to%20address%20the%20impact%20of%20Scotland%E2%80%99s%20concentration%20of%20land%20ownership%20-%20Discussion%20Paper%20Feb%202021.pdf](https://www.landcommission.gov.scot/downloads/601acfc4ea58a_Legislative%20proposals%20to%20address%20the%20impact%20of%20Scotland%E2%80%99s%20concentration%20of%20land%20ownership%20-%20Discussion%20Paper%20Feb%202021.pdf)> accessed 25.1.22.

<sup>80</sup> Jayne Glass, Steven Thomson and Rob Mc Morran, 'Does Size Really Matter? Sustainable Development Outcomes from Different Scales of Land Ownership' in Malcolm M. Combe, Jayne Glass and Annie Tindley, eds., *Land Reform in Scotland History, Law and Policy* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2020), pp.369-71.  
James Hunter, 'The Board Must Have Powers To Act at its Own Hand', in Maggie Cunningham, Michael Foxley, James Hunter, Brian Wilson, *On Scotland's Conscience* (Inverness: Kessock Books, 2017), pp.15-6

## Literary Form

Often described as a prolific writer (a term sometimes used to refer to both the volume of his work and politely imply perceptions of inconsistent quality), his twenty novels were published over the turbulent period from the aftermath of WWI, through the economic depression of the nineteen thirties and into WWII and beyond. A writer of plays, short stories, poetry and essays, the latter often published in Scottish literary periodicals, particularly the *Scots Magazine*, Gunn chose the novel as the vehicle for his most significant works. This form provided the openness and flexibility for both his expansive narratives and discussion of his concerns. Much of his writing centred around consideration of ‘the condition of Scotland’ and aimed to challenge its prevailing characterisation that derived from representations of the Celtic Twilight, Kailyardism and Historical Romance. Such blunt divisions are open to challenge but they signify important positions within Scottish literature at the time and the political and educational elements of the novels can be seen as expressions of committed opposition.<sup>81</sup>

*Butcher’s Broom* and *The Silver Darlings* are historical novels and *Highland River* is both retrospective and contemporary. Its more unconventional, and arguably modernist, form is episodic and moves forward and backwards in time. Its narrative style is also unusual in that, despite its largely autobiographical construction, its protagonist at points adopts a position outside of himself from which he describes events in which he was involved. By so doing the narrator creates distance between himself and his own life: suggestive of the idea that history can be both personal and objective but is not remote. Gunn’s belief in the agency of history is evident in his 1936 review of Edwin Muir’s *Scott and Scotland* where he states:

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<sup>81</sup> Margery McCulloch, ‘Literary Publishing: 1914-45’ in David Finkelstein and Alistair McCleery eds. *Edinburgh History of the Book in Scotland vol.4. Professionalism and Diversity: 1880-2000* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007). Online. pp.237-242

it is not that the history [Scott's] was untrue or was inadequate subject matter for his genius; it was that it no longer enriched or influenced a living national tradition [...] it was seen backwards as in the round of some time spyglass and had interpretive bearing neither upon a present nor a future.<sup>82</sup>

Scott's Highland history is seen as signifying a distortion or break in the continuities of Highland and wider Scottish life: the consequence being the alienation of people from their own past. Gunn is more aligned here with the view of James Hunter who states, 'The Highlanders with whom Scott identified ... were long dead clansfolk of the sort he wrote about in best-selling novels like *Waverly* and *Rob Roy*'.<sup>83</sup> Gunn, however, regards historical lives as continuing into the social relations of the present. This realist version is at odds with the distortions of Highland Romanticism and his suspicions are wryly expressed in his comment, 'The Scots are pretty good at history. Which, perhaps, is why most of them mistrust it. For it is full of facts, most of them ugly.'<sup>84</sup>

Gunn's 'history' has a very personal dimension and is grounded in the experience of living in specific, involved places and of being a member of a particular family and community. As an author of historical novels, he could be said to exemplify the type of writer whom Herbert Butterfield describes as having 'steeped his mind in some past age, and has lived in that age' and who understands that 'the historical novel is not merely history, but also geography'.<sup>85</sup> The overlap between history and geography is evident in through references to sites of memory. Gunn often refers to song or poetry as the means by which characters express and connect with instances of memory but its physical expression is represented in actual places: locations such as broch, standing stone, hill or strath. It is very direct and there are few references to intermediary representations such as books or pictures. The geography which provides the medium of Gunn's novels, however, is not solely that of one individual. Gunn's landscapes are communal ones which have been collectively worked and shaped by the

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<sup>82</sup> McCleery, *BO*, p. 106.

<sup>83</sup> James Hunter, *Set Adrift Upon the World: The Sutherland Clearance* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2015), p.127.

<sup>84</sup> Georg Lukacs, *The Historical Novel* (London: The Merlin Press, 1989) pp.59-60.

Neil Gunn, *Off in a Boat*, p.179

<sup>85</sup> H. Butterfield, *The Historical Novel* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1924), p.36., p.39.

actions of physical forces and generations of people over millennia. These concepts of communality and of long continuous habitation are combined in the belief of collective heritage within the texts. Tom Devine notes how resilient this concept has been, citing statements to the Napier Commission of 1882-3 and to the later Royal Commission on Crofting Conditions of 1954 which noted:

they have the feeling that the croft, its land, its houses are their own. They have gathered its stones and reared its buildings and occupied it as their own all their days.

They have received it from their ancestors who won it from the wilderness and they cherish the hope they will transmit it to the generations to come.

Whatever the legal theory they feel it to be their own.<sup>86</sup>

Such landscapes are subversive in that they challenge the idea of personal property, emerging from the development of modern materialism, to reflect the historical traditions, culture, beliefs and activities held within them. Land is not understood as a discrete object or simply the means of producing commodities, instead, it is regarded as the source of the utilities, pleasures and meanings of life. They echo the sentiment famously expressed by Norman MacCaig when he wrote:

Who owns this landscape? -

The millionaire who bought it or

The poacher staggering downhill in the early morning

With a deer on his back

Who possesses this landscape? -

The man who bought it or

I who am possessed by it?<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>86</sup> T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Clearances: A History of the Dispossessed* (Milton Keynes: Allen Lane, 2018), p.301

<sup>87</sup> Norman MacCaig, 'A Man in Assynt' in *Collected Poems* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1993) p.225

The persistence of this idea is highlighted by the poem's 2009 inscription in wall of the Scottish Parliament which continues to debate land reform and by its ability to inspire new workings of its subject.<sup>88</sup> Texts that place such concerns in a historical context and draw upon lived experience potentially have a useful role in critical studies of our own times. As A Fiona D McKenzie has argued with reference to the Clearances, '... they are also a contemporary metaphor. Processes of dispossession and cultural erosion did not end in the nineteenth century, and continue to be linked to circuits of capital within and outwith the British state and with processes of globalisation.'<sup>89</sup>

## A Critical Snapshot

The novels have been examined from a broad range of critical perspectives and their importance within the field of modern Scottish literature has been almost invariably accepted. Ian Campbell describes Gunn as being, 'long an enigma, much praised, not always read as much as the exceptional range of his fiction would encourage'. Gerard Carruthers has suggested that Gunn, in terms of volume of critical interest, is 'the' Scottish novelist of the twentieth-century literary renaissance and proposes that *Butcher's Broom* represents a 'watershed moment' where the Clearances were '*felt*' by many Anglophone Scots for the first time. Kurt Wittig's favours *Highland River* and describes Gunn as 'the only novelist whose work in some measure embodies all the ideals of The Scots Renaissance', arguing that it's vision and style is of the people, rooted in the Gaelic past but concerned with the crucial

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<sup>88</sup> Scottish Parliament, 'Ten years of devolution marked on the wall for Holyrood' <<https://archive2021.parliament.scot/newsandmediacentre/25951.aspx>> [accessed 20.3.22]

Mandy Haggith, 'A Passion for Assynt' in *Northwords Now*, Issue 16, Autumn <<https://www.northwordsnow.co.uk/userfiles/issues/16.pdf>> [accessed 20.3.22]. p.14.

'The Assynt Development Trust', <<https://www.assyntdevelopmenttrust.org/about>> [accessed 20.3.22]

<sup>89</sup> A Fiona D McKenzie, 'Re-claiming place: the Millennium Forest, Borgie, North Sutherland, Scotland' in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space* Vol 20. p. 2002, Vol 20. <DOI:10.1068/d266t> [accessed 30 January 2022] (p.538)



questions of the time. This theme is picked up by Roderick Watson where he states that Gunn's best work 'has a clarity of style and focus which relates to Gaelic literature's delight in the actuality of things, and then points to universals beyond them' and 'draw[s] on a poetic sense of the past to confront the central issues of modern alienation'. Gifford, Dunnigan and MacGillivray note his handling of such great themes as myth, history and regeneration. Gifford argues for *The Silver Darlings* as being Gunn's greatest work and sees a profundity in much of his writing: noting within it an important spiritual revival.<sup>90</sup> With reference to a related theme Scott Lyall argues that *Highland River* presents a form of post-war pagan spiritual revival through the resilience created by the protagonist's connection to folk memory and animism. Cairns Craig focuses upon how the texts represent ideas about fear. He sees Gunn as a writer who works with these concepts in the context of community: exploring how the erosion of traditional culture undermined the ability of the individual to withstand the social fear of the modern world. What is apparent from this very brief taste of the numerous critical readings of Gunn is that despite the particularity of their periods and settings the texts have a literary depth and richness that enables them to be open to a very broad range of readings.<sup>91</sup>

Despite being 'much praised' the novels have not been above criticism and some of Gunn's techniques, such as representing characters as symbols or icons, can be seen as both enhancing (Gifford) and undermining (Carswell). In the case of the latter, attention is drawn to an oversimplification, lack of depth or sentimentalisation of female characters and of a general idealization of women, 'something more typical than true'. McCulloch also notes

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<sup>90</sup> Ian Campbell, 'Disorientation of Place, Time and 'Scottishness': Conan Doyle, Linklater, Gunn, McKay Brown and Elphinstone' in Ian Brown, ed., *The Edinburgh history of Scottish literature, Vol 3.: Modern transformations: new identities (from 1918)* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2006), ebook, p.108.

Gerard Carruthers, *Scottish Literature*, (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2009), ebook, p.123.

Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh: Oliver and Boyd, 1958), p.333., p.339.

Roderick Watson, *The Literature of Scotland vol2: the twentieth century*, 2<sup>nd</sup> edn. (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2007), p.85.

Douglas Gifford, Sarah Dummigan, Alan MacGilvary, eds. *Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2002), pp.675-9.

<sup>91</sup> Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p.72. p.150

Scott Lyall, 'Pagan Modernism: First World War and Spiritual Revival in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song* and Neil M. Gunn's *Highland River*' in David A. Rennie, *Scottish Literature and World War I* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 2021), ebook, p.11 of 16.

Gunn's archetypal view of 'the mother' character in *Highland River*, commenting that she has little personality. Naomi Mitchison similarly draws attention to weaknesses in his portrayal of women in his later novels, '[his] women characters are never as real as the men' but praises their representation in *The Silver Darlings*.<sup>92</sup>

Christopher Whyte takes such criticisms much further: condemning the "formidable body of critical work on Gunn" as being so "uniformly eulogistic" as to make it hard to accept as valid. Whyte goes on to question Gunn's representation of Gaelic culture and to heavily criticise the constructions of masculinity and femininity in his novels. Expanding, he links this to a further concern, what he sees as associations between Gunn's idealism and fascism. Whyte's views are confrontational and they expose important and genuine points of substance which readings of Gunn should take into account. His analysis foregrounds aspects of the writing which may well make contemporary readers reflect: in particular, the gendered nature of aspects of the works and a reluctance to fully consider the dangers of political cultural conservatism: something rather unsatisfactorily characterised by Hart and Pick as a form of naivete. There is insufficient space here to do justice to these debates other than to note that responses to such criticisms often, first, centre around the idea of Gunn being a contradictory figure who was a very masculine-orientated writer albeit one positively influenced by strong, resilient women and, second, that Gunn's assertive celebration of the Gaelic cultural tradition should not be seen as rejection of development and change within that tradition but instead as part of his contesting its exclusion from modern national values. It is also rightly asserted that his form of nationalism was very distant from the imperialist expansionism of the fascist states of the nineteen-thirties and that he argued strongly for the idea of the peaceful, internationalist and independent small nation. However adequate or not these arguments are they serve to encourage nuanced readings that acknowledge the potential for merits and demerits, even very significant ones, to exist together in the texts. Taken in the round, however, it is argued that despite legitimate criticisms that can suggest the novels are in some ways dated, they continue to have the depth and status necessary for them to be considered relevant to debates about key themes of Scottish life. In particular,

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<sup>92</sup> Naomi Mitchison, 'Margery McCulloch. The Novels of Neil M. Gunn. Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press. 1987', in *Studies in Scottish Literature*, 24.1 (1989), online. Available at: <https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol24/iss1/20> pp.232-3.

their potential ability to speak to concerns about the relationship between people and the natural world.<sup>93</sup>

## Local and Universal

Whilst the world of the Scottish Highlands provides the novels' very specific place, they also convey a sense of the universal. For substantial parts of *Highland River* and *The Silver Darlings* Gunn presents the world from the perspectives of a child and an adolescent both of whom are engaged in understanding their identity, community and place. In both, these perspectives, (also used in other texts) are used to explore an affective and cognitive journey alongside a spatial one.<sup>94</sup> Gunn's treatment reflects both the Edwardian trend of 'Characteristically portraying childhood as a timeless world apart, 'unadulterated' by civilization, adults, and adulthood itself'<sup>95</sup> and a post-WWI interest in the inner psyche of the child.<sup>96</sup> Childhood here has a symbolic meaning representing both universal innocence and an instinctive association with nature.<sup>97</sup> The child's openness to his environment is illustrated in

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<sup>93</sup> Christopher Whyte, 'Fishy Masculinities' in the author ed. *Gendering the Nation; Studies in Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1995) pp.49-68.

Hart and Pick, NGHL pp.162-3.

Ryan D. Shirey, 'A Shrinking Highlands: Neil Gunn, Nationalism and the 'World Republic of Letters'' in *International Journal of Scottish Literature*, Issue 3 Autumn/Winter, 2007. 1 – 20 <<https://www.ijsl.stir.ac.uk/issue3/shirey.htm>> [accessed 13 May 2021] (p. 9)

<sup>94</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *Young Art and Old Hector* (London: Souvenir Press, 1993).

Neil M. Gunn, *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2006).

Neil M. Gunn, *Morning Tide* (London: Souvenir Press, 1975).

Art features in two novels and High in one.

<sup>95</sup> Adrienne E. Gavin, 'Unadulterated Childhood: The Child in Edwardian Fiction' in *The Child in British Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), p.167

<sup>96</sup> Adrienne E. Gavin, 'Introduction', in *The Child in British Literature* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), <<https://doi-org.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/10.1057/9780230361867>> [accessed 27 March 2022] (p. 12.)

<sup>97</sup> Affrica Taylor, 'Rousseau's Legacy: Figuring Nature's Child' in *Reconfiguring the Natures of Childhood* (London: Taylor and Francis Group, 2013), p.1-4.

the scene where Kenn, safe and warm in bed, envisages the animals of the strath with an intensity that conveys an impression of losing himself to another, shared form of identity:

all life was in conspiracy - rabbits, foxes, hares, cats, weasels, deer up in the corries - from beast to beast he would pass, understanding best, however, those that were curled up in a den. (*HR*, p. 71)

Similarly, in a later scene, Kenn assumes a bird-like perspective and soars above the strath.<sup>98</sup> In his imagined flight the world below is described in personified and animistic terms. The passage also refers to the estate keeper and notes the feeling of liberation engendered by knowing that he was elsewhere, 'The strath is emptied of his presence, drained of his fear of him, and the little figure takes a small run, full of eagerness and the thrill of freedom' (*HR*, p. 101). The passage links Rousseau's conception of the natural child at odds with the restrictions of unnatural adult society with the community-specific fear of an oppressive figure. This aspect of childhood is arguably developed by Gunn in its fullest form in the character of Art in *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* where the child is shown as an instinctive figure of resistance to totalitarianism. A passage in that text considers the nature of childhood and why, from the standpoint of authoritarianism, it is so problematic. In so doing it highlights the relationship of childhood with community, nature and 'wholeness of mind', central components of the novels themselves.<sup>99</sup>

The child's view enables the reader to encounter and examine aspects of his world with a sense of freshness and discovery: something harder to achieve by employing an adult character in the role of protagonist. The novelty of these encounters allows such scenes to be set out in some detail so that, despite their very particular character, they are not dependent upon the reader possessing a great deal of culturally specific knowledge. In *The Silver Darlings* Finn witnesses Rob kindling the neid-fire.<sup>100</sup> The description and explanation can

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<sup>98</sup> *HR*, pp.101-2

<sup>99</sup> *GIGD* pp.191-2.

<sup>100</sup> *SD*, pp.216-20

stand alone in its own context, a portrayal of distinctive cultural practice, but it is also something commonly shared in various forms in peasant societies across Europe and so its allusion to mythic knowledge and belief has much wider resonance.<sup>101</sup> Similarly, the description of Finn's first encounter with bereavement and the fear generated by his mother's illness present both a culturally specific and universal experience.<sup>102</sup> Such events are considered in their own context, as distinctive customs and practice, but are essentially human and so symbolise a universal experience that extends beyond its regional setting.

Gunn's use of symbolism extends into representations of power and ideology in the novels. These are often explored through encounters between characters who act either as representatives of traditional culture and the outside world or as potential bridges between the two. These set pieces are frequently shown through dialogues in which conflicting attitudes and interests are set out and have a dialectical quality. In some cases, such as the attempted rape of Mary by the Colonel in *LG*, these are so polarised as to be close to caricature but others, for example the discussion between Kenn and Radzyn in *Highland River*, are much more nuanced.<sup>103</sup> Other figures also stand for potential forms of cultural progress. In both *The Silver Darlings* and *The Grey Coast* a teacher fulfils this role, thereby highlighting the importance of education.<sup>104</sup> In *The Drinking Well* and *Second Sight* it is represented by open minded incomers who appear to respect local knowledge and are inclined to manage the land more sympathetically.<sup>105</sup>

While some character oppositions in the novels may appear polarised, they reflect more generalised real-world positions. Bonnie Vandesteeg uses a model of livelihood-based sense of place to understand how those who live and work on the land conceive it and regard others

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<sup>101</sup> Sir James Frazer, *The Golden Bough*, (London: Wordsworth Reference, 1993), pp.638-41.

<sup>102</sup> *SD*, p.261-3.

<sup>103</sup> Neil M Gunn, *The Lost Glen* (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2007) pp.170-5.

*HR* pp.215-6 The relevant example is from line 8 on p.215 to line 33 on p.216.

<sup>104</sup> *GC*, pp.43-4)

<sup>105</sup> *DW*, pp. 500-1.

*SS*. p.vi

who also make a claim to it.<sup>106</sup> This forms part of the construction of positions such as local and outsider and there are notable similarities between exchanges between Gunn's fictional characters and those observed by Vandesteeg at public meetings about land use.<sup>107</sup>

The novels' focus on Gunn's childhood environment of Dunbeath, the Sutherland straths and the Caithness coast does not limit their capacity to communicate to readers in the wider world. It is in fact the intensely personal 'local' character of the texts which underpins their ability to transcend their 'regional' setting. As Fiona Stafford suggests in relation to Seamus Heaney's 'Mossbawn', 'its subsequent existence in distant minds depends on that original deep intimacy'.<sup>108</sup> The point is echoed in Margery McCulloch remark, 'his [Gunn's] novels of essential Highland experience, while limited in context, are in no way parochial'.<sup>109</sup> She similarly illustrates the spatial and temporal universality of the works in her comparison of *Butcher's Broom* with Chinua Achebe's post-colonial novel, *Things Fall Apart*:

Like Achebe, Gunn sets out to investigate the effects of imperial modernity on a 'peripheral' fictional scenario, the circumstances of the Sutherland Clearances in particular, and to discover something of the way of life of the people before they were cleared from the land. By doing so, he hopes to find a narrative that will bring understanding of the present decline while restoring the lost connection between past and present, thus providing a stepping-stone to the future.<sup>110</sup>

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<sup>106</sup> Bonnie Vandersteeg, *Land for What, Land for Whom*, (Stormy Petrel, 2021), p.109.

<sup>107</sup> Vandesteeg. *LWLW*, pp.205-6

<sup>108</sup> Fiona Stafford, *Local Attachments – The Province of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010) p.11.

<sup>109</sup> M. McCulloch, NNG, p.4.

<sup>110</sup> Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Neil M. Gunn*, 'Chinua Achebe and the Postcolonial Debate', ed. by Michael Gardiner and Graeme Macdonald, *Scottish Literature and Postcolonial Literature: Comparative Texts and Critical Perspectives* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 2012) ebook, p.7 of 11.

## Inscapes

The term ‘inscape’ is used in this work to refer to how landscape and environments are apprehended and understood by people through their interactions with it. It is used to express the essential and personal nature of the highly particular experiences evident in Gunn’s writing and the combination of meanings that make up a shared culture. This use emphasises the embodied experience of a person’s environment. It is not intended to suggest an internal scape that exists separately as a picture of the outside world but instead it works as part of a continuum where the environment and the person are constituted as one. This definition draws upon George Giarchi’s interpretation of Gerrard Manley Hopkins use of the term. Giarchi suggests that ‘[Hopkin’s] poetry conveyed the concreteness of settings and at the same time captured in his encounter with them the specific individual experience.’<sup>111</sup>

Tim Ingold<sup>112</sup> draws upon the example of music to set out his conception of how the meaning of art can be found in the object itself, in how it is presented, rather than seeing the work as a representation of something else. Ingold quotes Langer to argue that ‘what music can actually reflect is ... the morphology of feeling’. Pursuing this she suggests that such ‘feeling’ is a way of literally being ‘in touch’ with the world and that ‘art gives form to human feeling’. Ingold illustrates this with examples from the composer Leos Janacek that show scoring for various sounds of the sea, suggesting that these are acts of ‘listening’ and are not merely records or impressions. He shows this as ‘perception ... grounded in an act of attention. Like watching and feeling, listening is something people *do*’. In this way, Ingold argues that examples such as these are not just symbolic expressions but rather are actions and expressions of being.

This point seems central to Gunn’s own exploration of how landscape comes to form an internal scape. In ‘Landscape Inside’ he too draws upon the example of music and the ocean and, citing old Gaelic songs and melodies, wonders in how many of them is the rhythm of the

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<sup>111</sup> George Giarchi, *Between McAlpine and Polaris*, (Thetford: Thetford Press, 1984), p.12.

<sup>112</sup> Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment*, (Abingdon: Routledge, 2000), p.23-4.

sea 'How often through the centuries his folk had listened to the wind on stormy nights, heard the tumult of the sea, the mounting tumult, the thunderous crash, the recession'.<sup>113</sup> Gunn affirms the profound effect of hearing such songs, arguing that it brings to him the essence of himself. He notes that the literal translation of one such song is 'When I am with myself' and that in this artistic encounter with something essential within 'The outer and the inner landscapes merge'. Like Ingold, Gunn is not suggesting something mystical in this process, instead he is 'trying to be quite factual; simply saying that unless you come upon yourself in some such way, as an element present in the scene or landscape, the chances are that you will forget it...'<sup>114</sup>

The problem of what happens when inscape becomes degraded is illustrated by the scene in *Highland River* (referred to earlier by Craig) where Kenn's brother, Angus, wounded and strained, has lost his relationship to his 'place' and so lost part of himself. It has been eroded and broken by the effects of war.<sup>115</sup> Through this he is transformed to someone who hunts men as he once hunted animals and is in turn hunted.<sup>116</sup>

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<sup>113</sup> Neil M. Gunn, 'Landscape Inside', in *Landscape to Light* (Dunbeath: Whittles, 2009) pp.107-8.

<sup>114</sup> 'Landscape Inside', p.110.

<sup>115</sup> *Highland River*, pp.152-9.

<sup>116</sup> HR. p.153.



## Chapter 2

### Gunn's human ecology

This chapter considers ideas of settlement and wilderness. These are used to refer to the opposition often evident in traditional and contemporary ideas about Highland landscapes and to consider how Gunn presents the interaction of the human and the non-human natural world.<sup>117</sup> The former is taken here to include inhabited and cultivated spaces and the latter land and sea wholly or largely untouched by human presence. Both have distinctive literary tropes, with wilderness seen in particular as having the potential to challenge anthropocentric attitudes that conceive of nature as existing primarily as a resource for exploitation. In the late twentieth century wilderness became widely seen as being in retreat and its 'decline' came to symbolise a generalised anxiety about a range of environmental and cultural concerns. Its use often signifies the Romantic concept, developed in the eighteenth century, of a sublime untouched landscape often associated with the Scottish Highlands.<sup>118</sup> The idea of an unchanged and unknown space is a powerful one but its force is now mainly in the imagination rather than reality, as the role of indigenous peoples and the processes of environmental causation are better understood.

These concepts are often shown as binaries. Settlement is frequently regarded as the urban and 'un-natural' and wilderness the wild and 'natural', with the prioritisation of the one regarded as being at the expense of the other. Such characterisations, however, distort the complexity of their interaction and Gunn's writing presents a synthesis in which representations of human and wild interests highlight important aspects of interdependence and mutual benefit, albeit often considered through accounts of events that undermined or

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<sup>117</sup> Meg Bateman, John Purser, *Window to the West: Culture and Environment in the Scottish Gàidhealtachd* (Sleat: Clo Ostaig, Sabhail Mor Ostaig, 2020), pp.438-9. ebook.

T. C. Smout, *Nature Contested: Environmental History in Scotland and Northern England since 1600* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), pp. 12-3.

<sup>118</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (London: Routledge, 2012), pp. 66-7. pp. 70-1.

disrupted their ‘balance’. In part, his accounts of the interaction of people and land might be seen as deriving from the particular historical pattern of Highland habitation where there were few large-scale urban centres and areas of settlement, pasture and wilderness mingled and were compressed and changeable.<sup>119</sup> The closeness and immediacy of the relationship between people and landscape is a constant in Gunn’s work and is described by Andrew Blaikie ‘as fus[ing] the relationship of the individual and the community in which they interact with the ground in and on which they have their being’.<sup>120</sup>

Gunn was interested in dialectics, and although he had some reservations about the term ‘synthesis’, sometimes preferring ‘complementarism’, it does seem to be an appropriate term to describe his thinking about traditional communities and environments in ways that seek to resolve conflicting demands whilst retaining that which is valued and important.<sup>121</sup> Smout makes a related point when he notes that European terrestrial ecosystems before 1800 CE ‘were determined by societies more anxious to minimise internal social friction and economic risk than to maximise the use of resources’.<sup>122</sup> He argues that this led to organic economic systems that created greater space for biodiversity as well as increasing habitats. Such a position reflects Gunn’s representations of landscape and place them within a framework of human ecology, taken here to mean ‘the study of ecological and social systems where social systems are part of an ecological whole.’<sup>123</sup>

Charles Withers describes the 1745 Jacobite rebellion as a critical point in shifting attitudes towards Scottish wilderness arguing that:

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<sup>119</sup> Meg Bateman, John Purser, *Window to the West: Culture*, pp.443. ebook.

<sup>120</sup> Andrew Blaikie, *The Scots Imagination and Modern Memory* [Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2013], p. 234.

<sup>121</sup> J. B. Pick (ed.), ‘Letter to C. M. Grieve’, *Neil M. Gunn: Selected Letters*, Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987), p. 121.

<sup>122</sup> T. C. Smout, ‘History, Nature and Culture in British Nature Conservation’ in *Exploring Environmental History: Selected Essays* ebook (Edinburgh Scholarship Online, March 2012) <DOI: 10.3366/Edinburgh/9780748635139.001.0001> 1 -14 (p. 6.)

<sup>123</sup> Centre for Human Ecology, *What is Human Ecology* <<https://www.che.ac.uk/about/what-is-human-ecology/>> [accessed 26 November 2022]

Highland 'wildness' - borne of military skill, geographical separateness, perceived irreligion and a different social system - had been overlain though not altogether replaced by ideas of the Highlands as 'wilderness'.<sup>124</sup>

Withers highlights how it and its inhabitants became redefined in terms of the sublime and the picturesque which emphasised a supposedly primeval landscape.

James Hunter argues that the commonplace impression of the supposed wilderness qualities of those landscapes is contrived and that 'you have to start by accepting that very little [...] is as nature intended. And this can be unsettling.'<sup>125</sup> Simon P. James notes the culturally specific nature of the term and that it has been often used to refer to land that has been cleared of its indigenous inhabitants and was associated with arguments justifying forms of 'improvement'. He also acknowledges the position that such is the extent of human influence on the environment that it can no longer be argued that true wilderness exists.<sup>126</sup> From the outset therefore, the terms are problematic and the distinctions they make contestable. However, they represent attitudes and positions which have persisted and are employed in ecological debate. Examining their relationship and presentation in the texts is helpful in considering Gunn's ideas and how they might correspond to later thinking.

Regarding settlement, for example, despite the population decline witnessed by Gunn and continuing still in much of Caithness and Sutherland, it does not follow that historically cleared places are seen as legitimate sites for re-peopling.<sup>127</sup> In discussing the subject of

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<sup>124</sup> Charles W. J. Withers, *Gaelic Scotland: The Transformation of a Cultural Region* (London: Routledge, 2016), p. 66.

<sup>125</sup> James Hunter, *On the Other Side of Sorrow* (Edinburgh: Mainstream, 1995), p.149.

<sup>126</sup> Simon P. James, *Environmental Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015), pp. 123-5.

<sup>127</sup> F.R. Hart and J.B. Pick, *Neil M. Gunn, A Highland Life* [Edinburgh: Polygon, 1985], p. 13.

The Scottish Government, *Population and Fragile Communities: Demographic Challenges in the Highlands and Islands*, paper 6, (20 October 2020)

<Octoberwww.gov.scot/binaries/content/documents/govscot/publications/minutes/2021/02/convention-of-the-highlands-and-islands-meeting-papers-october-2020/documents/paper-6-population-and-fragile-communities/paper-6-population-and-fragile-communities/govscot%3Adocument/Paper%2B6%2B-%2BPopulation%2Band%2BFragile%2BCommunities.pdf> [accessed 18 December 2022] (p.4).

population decline Hunter refers to the aspiration of the protagonist of *The Drinking Well* of having emptied glens resettled through consensual agricultural improvement but notes him being doubtful as to whether it will ever be achieved. ‘Dreams!’ he complains.<sup>128</sup> These doubts are expanded upon in a letter from Gunn to Naomi Mitchison where he explains that, in a bid to resolve the plot of his novel, he has to compromise his own socialist ideals and invoke the benevolent figure of an open-minded landlord. The tone of the letter, however, suggests that Gunn has little expectation of either a ‘glen soviet’ or a ‘sound landlord’ and the problem of resettlement remains a difficult one.<sup>129</sup>

Similar pessimism, resulting from the condition of the fishing industry, is evident in *The Grey Coast*, with its bitter anxiety over decline and emigration. Gunn’s explanation of the root causes of emigration is set out in his 1930 essay ‘Sea and Land - and Finance’ where he critiques the complex of interests and processes that recur in much of his fiction.<sup>130</sup> Economics form the basis of his analysis, but while he shows the immensity of the material harm caused by the Clearances and the collapse of fishing, he is keen to also emphasise its spiritual and psychological consequences.

Hunter notes that Gunn was encouraged by at least one partially successful example of people moving back onto cleared land, Portnalong in Skye. Gunn expressed qualified optimism about it after calling there in 1937 and described the faces of the people he encountered as like:

the mind of a folk who throve for untold centuries, and would thrive for centuries more, if the greed and egoism of the landed or plutocratic designers of our worldly affairs gave them half a chance’.<sup>131</sup>

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<sup>128</sup> James Hunter, *OSS*, pp. 167-8.

Neil M. Gunn, *The Drinking Well* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2006), p. 523.

<sup>129</sup> Neil M. Gunn, ‘To Naomi Mitchison’ in J. B. Pick (ed.) *Neil Gunn: Selected Letters* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987), pp. 86-7.

<sup>130</sup> Neil M. Gunn, ‘Sea and Land – and Finance, The Church’s Great Silence’ in Alistair McCleery and Diarmid Gunn eds. *Belief in Ourselves* [Dunbeath: Whittles, 2010], (p. 45-51) p. 45.

<sup>131</sup> Neil M Gunn, *Off in a Boat* (New York: New Amsterdam Books, 1990), p. 95.

The comment was made in the context of noting how sixty-six families from Lewis and Harris had settled in the area in 1924 as part of a Board of Agriculture resettlement scheme that had provided twenty acre lots as well other support. The crofters went on to set up a communal ‘sheep club’, operating on common grazing, which was jointly owned by seventy local people.<sup>132</sup> This resettlement, facilitated under the Land Settlement (Scotland) Act 1919, was part of the 1,571 new holdings created between 1912 and 1924 in response to the continuing dislocation and hardship resulting from the Clearances. The Act contained the power of compulsory purchase and had a role in ameliorating the ‘epidemic’ of land raiding by ex-servicemen in the early 1920s.<sup>133</sup> State ownership of land continues to be a significant feature in Skye although, as Ewan A Murray observes, it has had the unexpected consequence of discouraging contemporary community ownership.<sup>134</sup>

Gunn’s cautious hope for change can be seen in *Highland River* where Kenn passes the last inhabited house, the shepherd’s house, on his journey to the source of the river and reflects that the shepherd ‘was employed, no longer by the estate, but by a club of crofters... . Was this the first step in the coming back of the folk to their own’ (*HR*, p. 227). Though often precarious, stock clubs continue and are still seen to be a potentially important feature of crofting sustainability.<sup>135</sup>

Gunn’s comments make it clear about who and what he sees being the brake on resettlement, or ‘repeopling’. However, the idea of what constitutes a site of settlement has itself become more contested as post-displacement breaks in continuity of habitation have lengthened. Magnus Course explains, in his Uist study, how some sites of clearance, still marked by the stones of former homes, were initially defined by the local council as ‘uninhabited’ land and so permission to rebuild there was refused. This was not due on this occasion to the interests Gunn identifies, nor for environmental protection reasons, but had more to do with a local government desire to concentrate the population into particular areas for administrative and

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<sup>132</sup> Neil M Gunn, *OB*, pp. 92-5.

<sup>133</sup> Tom Devine, *The Scottish Nation* (London: Penguin, 2000), p. 446.

<sup>134</sup> Ewan A. Cameron, ‘Freshness, Freedom and Peace?: Land Settlement in Scotland After the Great War’, *Northern Scotland*, 11.2, 2020, pp. 161–175 <DOI: 10.3366/nor.2020.0219> [Accessed 14 June 2023] (p.167).

<sup>135</sup> Yvonne Richardson, ‘Taking Stock’ - study of crofters’ stock clubs’, Scottish Crofting Federation < <https://www.crofting.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/stockclubs.pdf> > [accessed 13 June 2023] p. 14.

economic purposes.<sup>136</sup> In another case, Meg Bateman and John Purser note how initial ‘environmental’ opposition to the construction of a wind turbine in Skye was only overcome by pointing out the long history of settlement relating to the ‘wilderness’ in question.<sup>137</sup> Such examples indicate the challenges faced in dealing with the legacy of depopulation that is central to Gunn’s work in general and present in all of the three primary texts.

The issue of ‘forgetting’ in relationship to settlement is discussed in Andrew Blaikie’s exposition of how representations of wilderness came to form part of a mythical national identity. He notes, with reference to Sorley MacLean’s poem, ‘Hallaig’, how characteristics of wilderness, namely spaciousness and solitude, do not in fact signify naturalness but instead foreground human absence as calamity and as being distinctly unnatural.<sup>138</sup> Bateman and Purser’s extensive research into the relationship between Highland people and landscape affirms this and they refer to its tragic nature in how that poem remembers the loss of the people from the land: noting its use of the traditional, symbolic and traditional figure of the tree, the birch, to represent the people no longer physically present.<sup>139</sup>

Some aspects of how Gunn employs such symbolism in *Butcher’s Broom* are noted below but similar meanings in a contemporary setting are also highlighted by A Fiona D Mackenzie in her study of the creation of a community forest at Borgie in Sutherland. Mackenzie considers how the symbols of stone and tree were used to ‘produce a counternarrative to the social and economic legacy of the Clearances.’<sup>140</sup> She describes how its construction utilised stone from the ruins of cleared homes and how trees were chosen and presented to communicate their place in the Gaelic language, their cultural meaning and historical use. The forest is characterised by Mackenzie as an act of resistance in a struggle, in the words of Edward Said,

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<sup>136</sup> Magnus Course, ‘Houses of Uist: Memory and Dwelling in the Outer Hebrides’, *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* (N.S.) 25 (2018) 51-65. (pp. 59-60)

<sup>137</sup> Bateman, *WW*, p. 443.

<sup>138</sup> Blaikie, *The Scots Imagination*, p. 242.

<sup>139</sup> Bateman, *WW*, p. 17., pp. 351-2., p. 942.

<sup>140</sup> A. Fiona D. Mackenzie, ‘Re-claiming place: the Millennium Forest, Borgie, North Sutherland, Scotland’, in *Environment and Planning D: Society and Space*, 2002, vol. 20, pp. (535-560) <DOI:10.1068/d266t> [accessed 30 January 2022] (p. 539.)

to 'reclaim, rename, and reinhabit the land.'<sup>141</sup> The wood draws attention to the place of people as part of nature. It does not attempt to return the land to its pre-Clearance form nor is it intended to recreate an idea of an imagined wilderness. Instead, it is intended to express how a people belong to land and that this need not dominate or exclude wider nature.

## Locating Settlements

Gunn's characterisation of settlement is exemplified in a short chapter of *Highland River*.<sup>142</sup> In it, Kenn, growing older and more confident, gradually extends his exploration of the land around his home. The process is one of increasing engagement with the landscape and as his spatial understanding increases so too does his knowledge and awareness of its character and of the people who lived there before him:

the races that had gone into his making had each left their signature on the river bank; often over and over, as children on gates and walls scrawl the names of those amongst them who are 'courting'. (*HR*, p. 52).

'Signature' is an expressive metaphor conveying several meanings. It is to do with writing but it is about inscribing on the land itself. It is unique and personal but also widespread and shared. Most notably it is used to bind a signatory to an object by literally marking it. Here Gunn combines past and present with the physical landscape and highlights the importance of signs of having 'been' there. The metaphor of writing on the land is perhaps unsurprising, coming from an author concerned with landscape, but it can be argued that the features referred to are not so much inscribed onto its surface but instead emerge from the

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<sup>141</sup> Mackenzie, 'Re-claiming Place' p. 538.

<sup>142</sup> *HR*, pp. 52-5.

interaction with it by the people who lived there. This is exemplified in his imagining of how the form of the broch, situated above the Dunbeath Water, came into being through the combination of its purpose, situation and constituent materials.

As it continues it identifies, with reference to placenames and ruins, the different peoples that settled along the river and where the boundaries of their influence lay. Gunn also links the genetic heritage of the mixing of ‘races’ with the forms of the land itself, ‘not only visibly in the appearance of the folk themselves, but invisibly in the stones and earth’ (*HR*, p. 52). In *Highland River* Gunn draws heavily on the locations and experiences of family childhoods and the celebratory tone of his protagonist’s recognition of their mixed heritage, genetic and cultural, is similarly evident in his essay, ‘My Bit of Britain’. Here he expands on the influences, evident in the landscape that shaped his own sense of identity, ‘Here lived the ancient native Pict, and hither came the Gaelic missionary... and the Viking raider to despoil him of land and life.’<sup>143</sup> Such writing illustrates Gunn’s sense of the deep past and his perspective is of one who has been aware of its presence from an early age and who is comfortable referring to long continuities. Land itself is personified as accumulating memories over time: an idea voiced in *Butcher’s Broom* where Ellie speaks of the power of the ‘memoried earth’ (*BB*, p. 194).

In the passage above Kenn is shown as being aware of an ‘influence’ deriving from these older peoples, suggesting that they have a continued presence. Such a belief is in keeping with the idea, implicit in ‘duthchas’, that conceives of a form of coexistence of past, present and future which is symbolised by the physical signs of earlier lives. Dwellings and their remains play an important part in this and their interweaving is illustrated by a quote from Cathie Anne NicFheargain, a contributor to a 2022 television documentary on duthchas, ‘We go back so far. When you think about it, the houses we live in, the house we were raised in, my great-grandfather and my grandfather built that. It’s like you were here before you were born’.<sup>144</sup>

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<sup>143</sup> Neil M. Gunn, ‘My Bit of Britain’ in Alistair McCleery and Diarmid Gunn eds. *Landscape to Light, Neil M. Gunn* (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2009) p. 20.

<sup>144</sup> ‘Duthchas’, BBC Alba, 28 December 2022, 3m45s.



Gunn's text indicates that this sense of connection with the lives of those who lived before is neither abstract nor insignificant. He describes the feelings generated by their presence as 'intensely real' and refutes any undermining of the idea from the opposing standpoints of either 'worldly scepticism' or 'sentimental credulity' (*BB*, p. 54).

While Gunn presents the visible signs of settlement, such as ruins and standing stones, as evoking the presence of those who lived before his autobiography also shows that, through understanding of how it was known and used, the flora of the country works in a similar way. He describes the plants and lichens that played a part in everyday life but his emphasis remains on those who used them and the fact that they should know and that their knowledge was transmitted across generations through daily practice:

it was this feeling for a people behind the wild flowers that was somehow most strongly evoked; not the name of the plant but that *they* should *know*. This was what was new and remained after when many names were forgotten.<sup>145</sup>

He continues by noting again that these figures of the past have a distinct presence, describing them as 'strangers yet with something known. ... The nameless folk who went back in time.'<sup>146</sup> The expression of this idea is seen in the character of Dark Mairi in *Butcher's Broom*.<sup>147</sup>

A later reference in *Highland River* further develops the idea of connection and coexistence. Here, Kenn's mother, speaking about her son Angus, says 'He was a movement of memories for her. She glimpsed dead persons in him' (*HR*, p. 146). While the words could be taken in a straightforward way to suggest a resemblance to deceased family members, the words 'dead persons', with their odd effect, implies more. It is a phrase that draws attention to itself and hints at the difficulty and dissonance of expressing an idea specific to one culture in the

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<sup>145</sup> Gunn, *AD* p. 145.

<sup>146</sup> *AD*, p. 145.

<sup>147</sup> *BB*, p. 8.

language of another. As it occurs slightly before the description of Angus's death it also insinuates the idea of premonition, that someone's death might be perceived within the living person, and of circularity where past and future generations might be perceived in one individual. There is additional poignancy given the link between the character of Angus and the circumstances of the death of Gunn's brother, Ben, in the war.<sup>148</sup> The phrase draws attention to the dead as a category that has a special standing in the present, with the word person signifying capacity and involvement in the social relations of the living. 'Persons', as opposed to 'people' also emphasises individuality and distinctiveness rather than the more anonymous sense of being grouped together which is inherent in the latter term.

Similarly, the earlier phrase, 'movement of memories', with its alliteration and rhythmic cadence has a poetic quality, a common and sometimes contentious characteristic of much of Gunn's writing, and combines ideas of both embodiment and the past.<sup>149</sup> The effect of the phrase, particularly in the context of an understated exchange between mother and son, is to emphasise that there is more understood here than simply the literal and the material. Meg Bateman and John Purser put this form of coexistence in the context of two contrasting understandings of the idea of an afterlife. They note that in the Christian cosmology the living and the dead exist in two separate worlds whereas, deriving from pagan roots, the traditional Highland conception is one where 'matter and spirit coexist on earth, as the living and the dead, and as physical nature and its essence.'<sup>150</sup> Such a conception provides a rich source of metaphor for expressing complex ideas about history, myth, memory and their relationship to place. As Scott Lyall notes, pagan references do not necessarily signify pagan belief but can symbolise liberation and opposition to aspects of modernity.<sup>151</sup>

*Highland River* draws heavily upon the location and experiences of several Gunn family members, in particular that of his brother John.<sup>152</sup> While the fictional house, like that of the Gunns themselves was newly built, it was situated in an area rich in both established

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<sup>148</sup> Hart, Pick, *NGHL*, p. 21.

<sup>149</sup> J. B. Pick, *Neil M. Gunn, Selected Letters* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 1987), p. 7.

<sup>150</sup> Bateman, *WW*, p. 860.

<sup>151</sup> Scott Lyall, 'Pagan Modernism' p. 186.

<sup>152</sup> Diarmid Gunn, 'Introduction', in *Highland River* by Neil M. Gunn, p. vii.

settlement and signs of earlier dwelling and working of the land. Regarding the area's cultural history, Alex Morrison comments that 'man made [...] features will be noted, both recent and ancient, indicative of occupation and widely varied use of the land over thousands of years.' Morrison describes this landscape as 'a complicated interplay between a given human community and [...] a particular set of natural circumstances.'<sup>153</sup> Natural circumstance contribute to the symbolic aspects of settlement for, as Morrison explains, the geology of Dunbeath and the strath is:

Middle Devonian Old Red Sandstone flagstones, the rocks that yield the great stone slabs utilised as walling, roofing and fencing from the time of the chambered tomb builders in the fourth and third millennia bc to the present.'<sup>154</sup>

This stone therefore helps to form and locate *Highland River* and is the substance of both dwelling places and the rocks by which the fishermen of *The Silver Darlings* navigate or founder.<sup>155</sup> The events of the novels are presented through the actions and thoughts of characters but the physical features of landscape always have a presence and do much more than simply provide a setting. Rather, Gunn represents both mineral and biotic elements of landscape in animistic ways that give them an active presence in the narratives.

The integration of the natural world into the physical forms of dwelling is similarly evident in passages of *Butcher's Broom* where the cottages of the Riasgan are figured both as animals clinging to the earth and as part of the land itself. The metaphor is extended by the use of anatomical terms to describe these longhouse structures and their distribution across the

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<sup>153</sup> Alex. Morrison, *Dunbeath: A Cultural Landscape, Occasional Paper no. 3* (Glasgow: Dunbeath Preservation Trust, University of Glasgow, 1996), p. 10.

<sup>154</sup> Morrison, *Dunbeath: A Cultural Landscape*, p.15-6

<sup>155</sup> *SD*, p. 510,

John Porter, 'An Introduction to the Caithness Flagstone Industry', in *Caithness: A Cultural Crossroads*, ed. by John R. Baldwin (Edinburgh: Scottish Society for Northern Studies and Edina Press, 1982), pp. 115-29, < [https://www.ssns.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/07\\_Porter\\_Caithness\\_1982\\_pp\\_115-129.pdf](https://www.ssns.org.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/10/07_Porter_Caithness_1982_pp_115-129.pdf) > [accessed 16 December 2022], (p. 124).

landscape is characterised as animals moving over the land.<sup>156</sup> The mood of the text at this point in the text is peaceful and thoughtful, suggesting a natural congruence of human and landscape. However, this completely changes during the later account of the settlement's clearance, where the homes are transformed from being dwellings into obstacles to industrial agriculture.<sup>157</sup> The event reveals the essential conflict between Gunn's conception of these cottages as engaged, historical places of living and the improver's conception of them being material objects of property.

Gunn details the construction of their roofs, highlighting the natural materials used and the patterns of ownership that applied to them. The couples, made of scarce birchwood, are noted as originating from woods owned by the landlord and so are 'deemed' to be the landlord's property and forbidden to be removed, even when the houses are burned. The thatch supports however were of bogwood, taken from the ground and so belonging to their inhabitants, '... from their peat bogs, to which they had an inalienable right, they dug the ancient moss fir, or bog pine, dry tough resinous wood, mostly root' (*BB*, p. 362).<sup>158</sup> This extract functions in linked ways. First, Gunn's text contrasts the word 'deemed', implying a definition imposed by others, with 'inalienable' meaning that which cannot be given or taken away. Second, it sets up the opposition between people and landlord for the control and ownership of the natural resources underpinning the clearance and the conflicting ideologies of private and communal ownership. Third, through the imagery of the phrase, the people are shown as literally pulling up the bogwood from the earth itself to put a roof over their heads. This points towards the tacit knowledge, skill and adaptability that enabled the creation of homes in such a setting and reminds how the landscape was once more diverse, with much greater forestation. The act of retrieving bogwood connects the Riasgan with the ancient landscape imagined by Gunn in *Sun Circle* 'where hazel and birch and rowan trees grew, ... [and] the uprising earth was covered with an ancient pine forest.'<sup>159</sup>

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<sup>156</sup> *BB*, p. 362-3.

<sup>157</sup> *BB*, p. 354-379.

<sup>158</sup> *BB* p. 362.

<sup>159</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *Sun Circle* (Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1996), p.13.

The act of digging up the bogwood battens has an essential quality that contrasts with the framing of the birchwood timber as a commercial commodity, and associates the community with the earth itself. Other words in the phrase enhance that impression: ‘ancient’ implies a link to the deep time of the land; ‘tough’ alludes to their character; ‘roots’ suggests that they are themselves rooted in the land. The bogwood also symbolises the independence of the people as it was ‘one of the few indispensable possessions of any family man’ (*BB*, p. 362). The use of the word ‘family’ to modify ‘man’ acknowledges vulnerable dependents and social obligations to others and is the opposite of the individualism represented by the evictors. By noting that ‘with a sufficient stock of them, he could erect a new home in almost a day’, and thereby defy the landlord, the battens are both practical tools and symbols of opposition. Unsurprisingly then they are deliberately burnt with the rest of the home. Gunn expresses the opposition he sets up by writing:

On the people’s part there was love of the land, love of its visible features as something that grew out of it as a birch tree grows out of it, and could be removed only by a tearing up of the roots’ whereas in contrast the landlord conceives only ‘material gain in a pattern called Progress.’ (*BB*, pp. 267-8)

## Sensing Injury

In *Butcher’s Broom* Gunn portrays its human settlement organically and represents it as one ecosystem situated within those of the wider landscape. The term ‘organic’ is potentially problematic, open to a range of meanings and in some usages is associated with social conservatism and nostalgia for a rural society that, if it ever existed, is definitely now in the

past.<sup>160</sup> Raymond Williams refers to this tendency but also comments how it also can signify positive characteristics such as wholeness and cultural development over time.<sup>161</sup> Gunn's own perspective seems to include elements of both but is more resonant with the thinking of Murray Bookchin when he writes about such communities as being defined as non-hierarchical, cooperative and interdependent.<sup>162</sup> Gunn highlights the closeness of this interaction by demonstrating how dependent the people are on the natural world and the directness of their contact with it, 'Here where they made their own clothing, their own shoes, built their houses, produced their food and drove a few cattle to market to get coin to pay rent' (*BB*, p. 21). The intimacy of the relationship demonstrates how attuned the people are to the natural world but it also indicates their vulnerability when its balance is disrupted.

Running through Gunn's account of the Clearances, including the example above, is a conception of natural life expressed in imagery of health and sickness. The community, like landscape itself, is implied as an organism which can thrive or become ill and injured. Representation of homes as sites of dwelling rather than residences is particularly evident through *Butcher's Broom's* portrayal of the loss of belonging to a place. Gunn highlights the resulting physical hardship but just as importantly he expresses the forbidding of welcoming the internally displaced into the home in a time of need in the language of moral injury and corruption, using words such as 'shame', 'uncleanness' and 'evil' (*BB*, p. 377).

The personification of the community continues with Gunn likening its destruction to the death of an old person, 'The Riasgan had shrivelled and grown smaller, like an old person who has died. Smoke was still drifting from the black sores on its skin' (*BB*, p. 379). By using illness as a metaphor to show its physical and moral condition Gunn links ideas of social justice with physiological concepts of naturalness and wellbeing. In this context, it is notable that 'Sea and Land - and Finance', which addresses both the impact of the Clearances and

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<sup>160</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction* (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008), p. 31., p. 55.

<sup>161</sup> Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society* (London: Vintage, 2003), pp. 345-6.

<sup>162</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* (Boston: South End Press, 1990) pp. 46-8.

other subsequent declines, is subtitled 'The Healing of a Nation'.<sup>163</sup> Gunn's interest and research into health and disease is also illustrated by how the subjects are often present in the novels and through the level of detail provided in writing concerning medical and veterinary matters relevant to Highland life.<sup>164</sup>

Internalisation of the condition of landscape similarly recurs in the texts. Memories of it, shared and individual, help shape the personality and resilience of the novels' characters. This is especially marked in *Highland River*, with its focus upon identity and reflection. In the scene highlighted by Cairns Craig as signifying the modern fear generated by community and cultural decline, Kenn and Angus meet in the trenches of WWI. It is apparent that for the former memories of home and the land work to preserve the integration of the self but for the latter it has become necessary to suppress them. The sense of incompatibility between the world of home and of mass, industrialised warfare is implicit in the reference made to the river of the Dunbeath Strath, which also works as a motif for Kenn himself.<sup>165</sup> Here, through the use of words such as 'nerve' and 'pain', a bodily image is generated and it is indicated that something as wholesome as the river is not only completely alien in the environment of the trenches but that it is actually difficult and dangerous to think about it. Angus still has memories of his pre-war life in his homeland but the war has reframed them. When Kenn reminds him of an incident from those years it leads Angus to recount his experience as a sniper and how the squeals, made by the soldiers he shoots, reminded him of when they shot rabbits together at home. The brothers laugh at this, perhaps uncomfortably, and a feeling of something wrong or ill is generated.<sup>166</sup> Angus's thinness and emaciated face is contrasted with the 'round-faced healthy brother of the old days' and his connection to their shared past is characterised as being unstable and tenuous (*HR*, p. 152).<sup>167</sup>

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<sup>163</sup> NMG, 'Sea and Land - and Finance', *BO*, p. 45.

<sup>164</sup> *SD*, p. 253-4

Neil M. Gunn, "'Gentlemen-The Tourist!': The New Highland Toast" in Margery Palmer McCulloch ed. *Modernism and Nationalism: Literature and Society in Scotland 1918-1939* (Glasgow: Association for Scottish Literary Studies, 2004), pp. 306-7.

*DW*, p. 85.

<sup>165</sup> *HR*, p. 154.

<sup>166</sup> *HR*, p. 153.

<sup>167</sup> *HR*, p. 154, p. 156.

Angus's alienation from his own memory by his experiences of the war has parallels with the effects of the Clearances described in *Butcher's Broom*, with their own references to illness. Gunn himself famously refers to his own feelings of reluctance to address the subject and records the sense of shame that was provoked by the fact, 'our own people did it.'<sup>168</sup> Hart and Pick note how the remark had a special emphasis because of the part played by a distant relative, George Gunn, who succeeded the notorious James Loch as factor to the Duke of Sutherland.<sup>169</sup>

The shame described is similar to that expressed by Davie in *Butcher's Broom* when he reflects on the issue of responsibility. He begins by considering his own 'impotence' and resultant 'guilt'. He realises that his people's leaders did not oppose the evictions because they were in fact the evictors. In this way, '*there is no enemy*', no other apart from themselves' (*BB*, p.370). The passage settles on the word 'negation' to give a final emphasis. The word implies more than solely the material destruction of the Riasgan but includes the more far-reaching loss where the culture itself is externally determined as having no meaning or worth. This concise explanation of responsibility expresses Gunn's condemnation of the role of clan chiefs and his distrust of hierarchies but what is also notable here is way in which the breakdown of mutual obligations is referred to in terms of psychic harm and how the texts stress the moral and spiritual components of human health. Such a preoccupation with health-related matters points towards his knowledge of both epidemics, such as the 1833 cholera outbreak in Caithness referred to in *The Silver Darlings*, and his observations of the deprivation in Caithness and Glasgow in the post-WWI period.<sup>170</sup>

The sense of despair which marks *Butcher's Broom* is largely absent from *The Silver Darlings* whose narrative is one of possibility and resilience, and the contrasting moods of *Butcher's Broom* and *The Silver Darlings* may arguably represent Gunn's own ambivalence about Highland self-regard. The potential for uncertainty is suggested in two articles written for the

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<sup>168</sup> Hart and Pick, *NMG A highland Life*, p. 103.

<sup>169</sup> Hart and Pick, *NMG A highland Life*, p. 105.

<sup>170</sup> James R. Coull, *Seasonal Migration in the Caithness Herring Fishery* pp. 93-4.



*Scots Magazine*, published in 1943 and 1945 respectively. In the first Gunn states ‘For the first time in centuries the feeling is growing upon us that we can do things for ourselves’. However, in the second he notes ‘one thing is always missing [...] that is the general lack of belief among the Highland people themselves in the future of their own land’.<sup>171</sup> Hunter accounts for the latter view by arguing that a prolonged process of devaluing of Highland culture, language and place resulted in a ‘demoralised population’ and that renewal, social and economic, must first prioritise restoring a ‘sense of worth’.<sup>172</sup> Feelings of collapse and pessimism associated with the Clearances dominate the account of the death of Dark Mairi who, Margery McCulloch argues, ‘symbolises the indigenous way of life’ and in many ways *Butcher’s Broom* is a harrowing novel: described by Cairns Craig as a ‘descent into hell’.<sup>173</sup> However, perhaps in keeping with Gunn’s mixed views it also contains signs of resilience and continuity. It notes for instance how Colin, Mairi’s son, had ‘abnormal curiosity’ for myth and poetry and would ‘draw upon her when they were alone with persistence and the solemn voice of an equal’ (*BB*, p. 244). The idea that despite Mairi’s subsequent death such knowledge would continue into the future, albeit in a radically different world would seem to prefigure the potential for regeneration Craig refers to when he states with reference to Gunn’s writing that, ‘ancient knowledge has to be accommodated to new experience but it is precisely the power given by ancient knowledge that makes it possible for people to survive the new experience’.<sup>174</sup>

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<sup>171</sup> Neil M. Gunn, ‘Scotland Moves’ in *Belief in Ourselves*, ed. by Alistair McCleery and Diarmid Gunn (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2010), p. 63-6 (p. 66).

Neil M. Gunn, ‘Belief in Ourselves’ in *Belief in Ourselves*, p. 67-70 (p. 67-8, p. 70).

<sup>172</sup> James Hunter, ‘The Board Must Have Powers To Act At Its Own Hand’ in *On Scotland’s Conscience* (Inverness: Kessock Books, 2017), p. 25-6.

<sup>173</sup> Margery McCulloch, *NNG*, p. 60.

Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 157.

<sup>174</sup> Cairns Craig, *MSN*, p. 157.

## Feast and Famine

Representations of food, its production, consumption and cultural significance, are prominent in the novels. This is expected given their setting in economies where basic subsistence plays such a large part of life and cannot be taken for granted but it reveals much about its place in Gunn's conception of human ecology. Like the aspects of shelter noted above, food is inseparable from representations of landscape and seascape and as a motif it functions to show the network of relationships that exist between human settlement and the natural world. While the presence and pleasure of food is frequently celebrated a sense of vulnerability and fear of its absence is often present. The imagery Gunn employs to foreground this serves to weave together landscape and human character and Gunn's technique is evident in a passage of *The Grey Coast* where Jeems is shown cautiously sowing oats and the 'meanness' of his movements are seen as a metaphor for the man, the land and the times, 'the eternal greyness, that was a poverty, an exhaustion as of an animal hunger gnawing at stones for bread.'<sup>175</sup>

*The Silver Darlings* opens with Tormad cooking limpets, 'famine food' with a long cultural history in the Highlands, to be taken with him as bait and potential food for the crew when he goes fishing. Within a few pages the former settled agriculture of the pre-clearance glens is contrasted with the community's new precarious existence on the coast.<sup>176</sup> The passage juxtaposes their earlier 'pleasant and inoffensive' lives, where food was relatively available, with the scarcity and danger of their first year living on the seashore, 'nothing to live on but shell-fish and seaweed' (*SD*, p.13). The word 'inoffensive' immediately implies the injustice of their forced removal and that their mode of living was one which did not harm others. Reference is made to the drowning of Catrine's uncle, who had died despite 'being nimble at hunting the waves' (*SD*, p.13). Human vulnerability and the cost of the way of life is

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<sup>175</sup> *GC*, pp. 112-3.

<sup>176</sup> Louise B. Firth. 'What have limpets ever done for us? On the past and present provisioning and cultural services of limpets', *International Review of Environmental History*, Volume 7, Issue 2, 2021.  
< <https://doi.org/10.22459/IREH.07.02.2021.01>> [Accessed 19. June 2023], pp. 5-45. (p. 12.), (p. 21.)

established in these first pages and the text moves quickly into detailed descriptions of the condition of the community and the nature of the emerging fishing industry.

All three of the novels begin by introducing central characters and situating them immediately in the action of the narrative. They quickly provide a depth of detail, establish key themes and situate their characters within the environment. Each protagonist is different: an old woman in *Butcher's Broom*, a young man in *The Silver Darlings* and a young boy in *Highland River*. All however are engaged in activity that concerns the gathering or acquisition of food, fish in each case. The food is to be shared with others in the family or community so while the references speak to the economic and agricultural arrangements of their particular period, they also establish the equally important social functions which are a constant in them all. Similarly, all quickly reference issues of ownership, or the lack thereof, concerning the means of food production. In *Butcher's Broom* attention is drawn to the privileged position of the minister, who has the use of a glebe for his sheep and is appointed by an absentee landlord.<sup>177</sup> In *The Silver Darlings* it is stated that 'no landlord owned the sea' (*SD*, p. 13). In *Highland River* Kenn experiences 'the fear of gamekeepers, of the horror and violence of law courts' (*HR*, p.2). Each opening therefore establishes its own particular landscape, inhabitants and their economic and social relationship. These provide the starting point from which each narrative develops and they situate food at their centre.

The texts depict food gathering and production as a communal activity, involving both sexes and all ages, and at various points images of it are densely packed together. In *The Silver Darlings* the thirteen-year-old Finn is shown hunting rabbits and it is explained that he and his companion are 'connoisseurs' of game generally. This is immediately followed by noting his responsibility for driving the cattle. He then goes to meet his 'granny', Kirsty, who is washing the potatoes they have grown and in quick succession there are references to growing corn, gutting herring, unloading fish from the boats and Finn and Donnie themselves fishing near the shore. Throughout the short passage Gunn provides details of plants and animals, tools

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<sup>177</sup> *BB*, p. 16.

and methods and these are all shown as part of a highly embodied interaction between the landscape and the people living within it.<sup>178</sup>

The level of detail and its centrality to the narrative illustrates how in the novels the basics of life are never incidental but are in fact subjects under consideration. They are part of the lived experience of the characters and their culture and understanding of the world emerges from their practice within it. Their various tasks can be argued to be an example of what Tim Ingold describes as acts which ‘constitute dwelling’ where ‘each task takes its meaning from its position within an ensemble of tasks, performed in series or in parallel, and usually by many people working together.’<sup>179</sup> Ingold locates this activity within a ‘taskscape’ and suggests that just as landscape is made up of related features so too does a taskscape consist of an array of related activities. In this way landscape and taskscape are not separate but continuously shape each other. Such a framing is implicit in Gunn’s writing of landscape where the social and the natural worlds are shown to reflexively interact. The way by which aspects of a taskscape lead in turn to cultural practice is visible in a scene in *Butcher’s Broom* that depicts the end of the harvest.<sup>180</sup> Here, Gunn describes the making of graddan and shows how through a process of skills the harvest is refined, transformed and shared. The scene is a celebratory one, with spiritual significance and marked by ritual action and words, culminating in the sharing of food and with music and dancing. Gunn’s handling of such scenes is marked by the high level of attention that is shown. He notes the small details of preparation and sharing as well as the physical sensations of eating.

Details concerning the processes of food production are an important part in the instrumental functioning of the novels where the writing situates local events and concerns within the wider economic and political context. In one section of *Butcher’s Broom* a passage of third-person narration provides an exposition of the social and economic relations of the time.<sup>181</sup>

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<sup>178</sup> *SD*, p.160-5

<sup>179</sup> Tim Ingold, ‘The Temporality of the Landscape’ in Tim Ingold, *The Perception of the Environment: Essays on Livelihood, Dwelling and Skill* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2022), (pp. 234-258.) p.241-2.

<sup>180</sup> *BB*, p. 45-7.

<sup>181</sup> *BB*, pp. 122-7.

Here, the young men of the glen are shown marching away to enlist in military service, their decision resulting from a mix of economic insecurity, ideas of adventure, false promises of land and misplaced clan loyalty. The passage describes their leaving and the responses of the families watching them go. The writing initially stresses immediate family and communal bonds but then uses the transition point of their crossing the skyline of the glen and moving into the world beyond to note how similar events were happening all over the north and addresses the bigger picture, referring to the part the men would play around the world in imperial wars. Deaths are foreshadowed as are the outcomes of various military campaigns and their implications for the economics of food production, ‘Crushed by taxation, starved for food, bread riots amongst her ever-increasing hordes of industrial workers, wheat soaring to its 120 shillings a quarter’ (*BB*, p. 125).

The broad sweep of the passage gives it an epic quality, as it ranges across space and time and links the words and actions of distant ‘great men’ with the fate of local individuals. It describes the legal and economic system that prevails, and its consequences for the people of the Highlands, but it grounds all of this on the fundamental issue of food, ‘But if food was under the divine law of price, it was under the secular law of human ownership. And the man who owned the land owned the food before it was produced’ (*BB*, p. 125). This quote, and the text in which it sits, can be read as a distillation of Gunn’s thinking about the relationship between land ownership, human sustainability and his conception of landscape as a place where people dwell. Gunn again reminds that the sensual pleasure and comfort shown as deriving from food is precarious and that the most basic human functions are subject to forces outwith the community’s control.

The world presented in passages such as these is far from nostalgic or idealised and they reveal the perceived conflict between communal social ecology on the one hand and environmental exploitation on the other. Gunn’s concern for achieving a way to balance opposing forces, of which these are important elements, can be seen in a letter to Naomi Mitchison during another time of conflict where he uses embodied metaphor to show what he thinks is required, ‘This appalling tendency to live - and fight - and destroy - in our heads.

And it can't just be offset by trying to live in our bowels. We must somehow get an authentic living balance...'<sup>182</sup>

Attention to food production is also prominent in *The Silver Darlings*. In one example discussion of some precise technical details of net making lead into consideration of the grand-scale market forces that apply across the industry.<sup>183</sup> The description opens with the schoolmaster using Socratic questioning to encourage his class of children and adults to re-examine the seemingly obvious process of how nets are produced and he begins by framing the purpose of his teaching to note the historical exploitation that had occurred in the Highlands.<sup>184</sup> The subject at hand is arithmetic and its mastery is argued to be a means of protection from being deceived by 'governing forces superior in possessions, craft and in knowledge' (*SD*, p. 178). Like the passage noted above, this particular paragraph provides another distillation of a Gunn position, one where he sets out ideas concerning labour and exchange. The schoolteacher affirms the fact of exploitation by a property-owning class and stresses the importance of education in challenging it. By extension he refers to his own responsibility towards his students and uses a salient example to make his points, which are not about abstract calculations but instead concern the production of an iconic commodity, a net. As the process of net making unfolds the class develop their understanding of the labour required, the high level of skill involved and the low return obtained for its production. Arithmetic is central to understanding but the real value of the lesson is in creating within the minds of those present a consciousness of the economic relations underlying something seemingly unremarkable and taken for granted. The text not only has an educational function but affirms the social solidarity between teacher, fishermen and shore-based worker.

The scene shifts from the classroom to a ceilidh in the house of Meg, the netmaker, and by means of a brief description she changes from being the anonymous worker figure discussed earlier to become a distinct individual whose presence, real and symbolic, is emphasised by

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<sup>182</sup> J. B. Pick, *NGSL*, p. 78.

<sup>183</sup> *SD*, pp. 178-87

<sup>184</sup> *SD*, pp.177-81.

her being shown continually weaving together the strands of a net.<sup>185</sup> While other of the novel's narrative strands are also developed the central subject of the scene is the dialogue between Wull, a fisherman, and George, the fishery foreman. Continuing with the image of the net, Gunn uses these characters to set out the wider dynamics of the industry.<sup>186</sup> The writing has a comic element, but the tone of the humour is kindly and their exchange reveals their sharpness and understanding. The image of Meg too is respectful and dignified, signalling virtues such as hard work, cleanliness and thrift. Their portrayal is sympathetic and humane and, although part of the exchange is contentious, it is implied that all points of view have weight, intelligence and value. The subject is contextualised by the third person narration which provides detail about the declining levels of government subsidy and the wider, underpinning economic forces that are at play. The link between the local experience and the wider context is made, 'For a moment their little world opened out into the great world. They glimpsed regions far beyond the waters of their creek' (*SD*, p. 185).

These examples illustrate how the writing works to connect the local natural setting, glen or coastal settlement, to the everyday life and subsistence of its community. It then expands to contextualise characters within their own history and makes a common cause with other, similar communities. These personal stories are then revealed as being part of the greater processes occurring in the wider world. *The Silver Darlings* is set in the first few decades of the nineteenth century but the industry dynamics and ecological concerns highlighted in the dialogue between Wull and George also form the basis of Gunn's essays on the subject written in the 1930s and, with their references to concern for species sustainability and contentious economic industry models, their continuing significance is notable.<sup>187</sup>

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<sup>185</sup> *SD*, p. 181, p. 184.

<sup>186</sup> *SD*, p. 183.

<sup>187</sup> NMG, 'The Family Boat', *Belief in Ourselves*, p. 41.

Scottish Herring, 'Scottish stocks today', <<https://scottishherring.org/about-scottish-herring/timeline/#:~:text=Fishing%20for%20herring%20in%20the%20North%20Sea%20and,measures%20were%20implemen ted%20and%20continue%20to%20this%20day.>> (Edinburgh Napier University) [accessed 5 April 2023]

Positions regarding land ownership are often expressed within novels and short stories through their particular treatment of the subject of poaching, with the theme working in a range of ways. *Highland River* opens with its famous poaching incident where the nine-year-old Kenn battles to land a salmon nearly as long as himself. The account immediately sets up the opposition between the ‘enemy forces’ of landowners on one side and his ‘hunting ancestors of the Caledonian Forest’, ‘grown up brothers and his brothers’ friends’ and himself on the other (*HR*, p. 2). The divisions between the two groups are of class, history and culture and they are highlighted by the contrast that is made between Kenn’s achievement and that of Master Douglas McQuarry. He too had landed a salmon but had done so in far more amenable circumstances and from a very different social position.<sup>188</sup> Reference is made to Kenn’s mother having commented to Kenn about the other boy’s lesser but highly publicised achievement by saying that ‘*You would never be able to do such a thing*’ (*HR*, p. 9). The statement is a poignant one in that, first, it acknowledges that any successful landing of a salmon by her son would have to be kept a secret as to openly celebrate would be to admit to a crime. They had no ‘entitlement’ to the food that could be taken from the river that ran a few yards from their door. Second, by recognising the dilemma the mother’s words imply a discouragement of her son whereby she had in part, through fear of consequences, internalised laws and attitudes that would restrict his freedom and she in turn was transmitting this to him. The passage hints at the sadness and anger implicit in such a situation and has echoes of the proscription of eating the forbidden fruits of the land that forms such an important part of *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*.<sup>189</sup>

The value of the salmon is referred to in different ways. First it is conceived as a spectacular hunting trophy, which anticipates Kenn’s later achievements in life through its associations with knowledge and wisdom.<sup>190</sup> Alongside this there is recognition of its quality as a food and how this is characteristic of its place in nature, ‘Strong flakes, that would break on a white curd, and feed hungry men, feed families. ... The strength and vigour of the sea’ (*HR*, p. 13). It also has a barter value and the better part of it is given over in return for a pair of boots.

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<sup>188</sup> *HR*, p. 9.

<sup>189</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* (Edinburgh: Polygon, 2006), p. 21.

<sup>190</sup> Miranda J. Green, *Dictionary of Celtic Myth and Legend* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), p. 98.



Food, boots on a child's feet, affirmation in the family: these are all fundamentals in the ecology that Gunn writes into the scene. While its representation can be argued to be idealised it nonetheless indicates an attitude to the act of poaching which reflects a particular relationship with the landscape and its resources. The practical benefits of poaching are obvious but its symbolism, through parallels about accessing the salmon of wisdom and the tree of knowledge are marked and recur elsewhere in his fiction.<sup>191</sup> In this way Gunn uses the act to demonstrate not only a challenge to authority by 'theft' but also through the acquisition of knowledge and awareness.

That what Gunn presents so positively is in fact prohibited and dangerous is characteristic of the perceived post-Clearance inversion of attitudes that he so opposes. The virtuous nature of the act of taking the salmon contrasts with the killing of the great stag, King Brude, in *Second Sight*.<sup>192</sup> It too is conceived as a great sporting trophy but its botched shooting by the villain of the novel illustrates how the animal is defined almost exclusively in those terms, even to the extent that a mercy shot to the head from the keeper who redeems the situation cannot be given for, 'He dare not mar its beauty as a trophy' (SS, p. 222). The text presents the killing as a mean and distressing act, the motivations for which are shallow. The taking of the salmon is shown as illegal but morally justified however the killing of the stag is shown as legal but morally distorted and even the novel's more sympathetic characters from the sporting estate-owning class are portrayed as starting from the position of regarding the stag first as property.<sup>193</sup>

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<sup>191</sup> *GIGD*, p. 27.

<sup>192</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *Second Sight* (Dunbeath: Whittles Publishing, 2002), pp. 220-3.

<sup>193</sup> *SS*, p. 234.

## A Solitary Wilderness

Quoting Donald MacLeod, James Hunter notes how the policies of Highland landowners transformed much of Sutherland into ‘a solitary wilderness’, with its displaced inhabitants forced to exist in desperate conditions on the coast.<sup>194</sup> Hunter’s reference comes in the context of a discussion of the history of ideas about land ownership where he comments upon the emergence of the Highland Land League and the support for land nationalisation articulated in Alfred Russell Wallace’s *Land Nationalisation*, published in 1882, nine years before Gunn’s birth. He notes Wallace’s assessment of the Clearances as a ‘crime against humanity’ and how they demonstrated the cost of ‘permitting a tiny minority ... to do as much as they liked with that country’s basic resource, its land.’<sup>195</sup>

This is clearly a sentiment shared by Gunn. MacLeod’s ‘wilderness’ however does not refer to a land unknown or untouched by human influence but to spaces from which people had been forcibly removed. This usage refers only in part to the natural form of the land itself and instead draws attention to its political and moral characteristics. Regardless of any intended ‘improvement’, it is bound up with associations of exclusion and entitlement, something which still persists in some of the more radical proposals to create new ‘wildernesses’ in formerly settled land for the enjoyment of wealthy green ecotourists.<sup>196</sup>

Created ‘solitary’ wildernesses have a constant presence in the novels, reminding readers of what once was. However, other forms of wilderness are also used to strong effect. These similarly highlight the absence of the human but are varied in their associations and uses. In *Butcher’s Broom* the early passage describing the Riasgan community refers to it as ‘shut up and shut off’ in the glen by the surrounding mountain tops.<sup>197</sup> The warmth and security

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<sup>194</sup> James Hunter, *Set Adrift Upon the World: The Sutherland Clearances* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2015), p. 453.

<sup>195</sup> Hunter, *SAUW*, p. 454.

T. M. Devine, *The Scottish Nation* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 449.

Andy Wightman, *The Poor Had No Lawyers: Who Owns Scotland And How They Got It*, (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2015), pp. 142- 5.

<sup>196</sup> Cameron McNeish, ‘Alladale Estate: Walking with Wolves’

<<https://www.walkhighlands.co.uk/news/viewpoint-walking-with-wolves-alladale-estate/>> [accessed 30 March 2023].

<sup>197</sup> *BB*, p.13.

afforded is set against imagery of austere corries and precipices, with their implied remoteness and inaccessibility providing a metaphor for both God and the religious elite, 'the Men', who have figuratively scaled the summits. The overshadowing of the community by mountain and religion speaks to the combination of ideas referred to by Greg Garrard when he comments that 'The Judaeo-Christian conception of wilderness ... combines connotations of trial and danger with freedom, redemption and purity.'<sup>198</sup> Gunn's text however questions the extent to which the type of 'freedom' and 'purity' implied in their fierce faith is actually a force for good and the sense of God being distant stands in contrast to the immediate, present spirituality represented in the character of Dark Mairi.

Imagery of wilderness and religion is taken up again in the final passage of *Highland River* where Kenn nears the end of his journey to find the source of the Dunbeath Water.<sup>199</sup> The mountain of Morven and the surrounding hills are likened to prophets wearing mantles of cloud and in an earlier scene the journey is suggested as a form of pilgrimage.<sup>200</sup> The landscape consists of moorland, peat bog and distant hills and in the course of his journey Kenn passes cottages and the ruins of older houses, suggesting that he has left human settlement behind and is now in a more wild and distant place. In reality the distance between his old home and the source of his river is only a few miles suggesting that the impression of wilderness is one of perception. The topographical contrasts and compressions that exist in such a relatively small area, where sea and coast border strath and wood which in turn lead quickly to moor and mountain, mean the coexisting of very different landscape forms closely alongside each other.

Climate too plays a part, so that the benign summer sheilings referred to in *The Silver Darlings* would assume a different, wilder character in harsh winter months.<sup>201</sup> A similar point is made in *The Drinking Well* where Iain nearly dies in a snowstorm that gives an otherwise

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<sup>198</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2012), p. 68.

<sup>199</sup> *HR*, p. 237.

<sup>200</sup> *HR*, p. 210.

<sup>201</sup> *SD*, p.18.

amenable landscape a much wilder identity. Spatial scale and seasonal change therefore mean that landscapes are not fixed in character. In the passage referred to from *Highland River* Kenn is able to walk into a ‘wilderness’ in the course of a day and the quickly changing features of the land in turn facilitate the broad scope of his reflections. The landscape at the source of his river has an undoubtably wild and solitary character but while the text describes its hills, birds, deer and plants, it prompts Kenn to think about how Pict, Gael and Viking had previously experienced it. Even in its most wild locations the writing continues to anchor people within it.<sup>202</sup>

The most striking use of the idea of wilderness in the novels is the representation of the sea and island scapes encountered in the great sea journeys of *The Silver Darlings*. With its epic content of dangerous voyages, rites of passage and finding of wealth the novel combines the more familiar intimacy of Gunn’s communities with the great breadth of unknown seas and islands. John Murray notes how the shift of the population to the coast during the Clearances, with fishing as the source of livelihood, changed the frames of reference of these communities through new landmarks and sense of much greater scale, ‘Their perception of the world expanded in response to this new overseas trade.’<sup>203</sup> The novel begins by showing the novice fishermen’s unfamiliarity and inexperience: indicated by descriptions of their early ventures onto the water, where they begin to learn and tentatively move out from the coast.<sup>204</sup> The sea is presented as unknown and challenging and although later their knowledge and familiarity grows the seas are still experienced largely as wilderness.

The text describes its wildness and remoteness but at the same time it acknowledges the presence of others within it. This extends to the past and connects the fishermen with others who had sailed those same waters. Roddie’s allusion to a ‘Gaelic poem that described all the different kinds of wave there are’ implies a reference to Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair’s

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<sup>202</sup> *HR*, p.241

<sup>203</sup> John Murray, *Literature of the Gaelic Landscape: Song Poem and Tale* (Dunbeath: Whittles, 2017), p. 202.

<sup>204</sup> *SD*, p. 14., p. 17.

‘The Birlinn of Clanranald’ and associates Roddie and his crew with an older tradition.<sup>205</sup> It acts as a reminder of the existence of well-travelled sea roads linking Ireland with Argyll and the Hebrides.<sup>206</sup> This connection to the past is also an embodied and cultural one. In considering his own working of the poem Alan Riach describes the construction and operation of the boats noting how the form and function of the Birlinn shape, and are shaped by, the actions of the crew. Quoting Adam Nicolson, he foregrounds the cultural history that a boat signifies, ‘The knowledge that is gathered in a boat is a great human inheritance, especially valuable because it is not material but intangible, a legacy made only of understanding’.<sup>207</sup> The boat is seen as the manifestation of an ancient train of thought characterised by the accumulation of attention and action which lead to its design and handling. It is seen as an extension of the many who have built and sailed such boats with its movement reflected in the rhythms and pauses of the poem.<sup>208</sup>

Links between language and seascapes are indicated in *The Silver Darlings* in another important way. When the crew set off it is pointed out that they do so without a watch or compass.<sup>209</sup> Charts would have been beyond the reach of early herring fishers and there are no significant references to their use in the text. Roddie and Finn are shown way-finding through their environment by navigating a course with reference to the real world rather than using representations on a map. Their journey involved sighting landmarks, many of which were distinguished with stories and legend and having shapes that gave rise to their names. This is supplemented by lore concerning tides and winds embedded in cultural memory.<sup>210</sup> The immediacy of this attention to the forms of seascape is similarly reflected in *Birlinn* itself:

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<sup>205</sup> *SD*, p. 298.

Derrick S. Thomson, *Alasdair Mac Mhaighstir Alasdair: Selected Poems*, (Edinburgh: Scottish Academic Press Ltd., 1996) p. 137.

<sup>206</sup> David Gange, *The Frayed Atlantic Edge* (London: William Collins, 2020), pp. 171-3.

<sup>207</sup> Alan Riach, ‘Location and destination in Alasdair mac Mhaighstir Alasdair’s ‘The Birlinn of Clanranald’’, in Szuba, M. and Wolfreys, J. (eds.) *The Poetics of Space and Place in Scottish Literature*. Series: Geocriticism and spatial literary studies. (Palgrave Macmillan, 2019) online pp. 17-30. (p. 5 of 14).

<sup>208</sup> Riach, ‘Location’ (p. 9 of 14).

<sup>209</sup> *SD*, p. 272.

<sup>210</sup> Martin Martin, *A Description of the Western Islands of Scotland Circa 1695 and A Late Voyage to St Kilda* (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2018).

Gerard McNamarra, *The Voyage of Saint Brendan the Navigator* (CreateSpace Independent Publishing Platform, 2013).

Keep in touch with the helmsman, there at the tiller,  
 Note landmarks, waymarks, sea-currents, bright  
 Headlands, far mountains, all weathers in sight.<sup>211</sup>

Mapping of the seas and islands not only shifted emphasis from form to picture, it also became part of redefining the space itself. Changes in nomenclature and spelling are noted by John Murray as he traces the placenames of Finn's journey and an examination of a map from the period illustrates how anglicized versions of Gaelic and Norse placenames had begun to replace native nomenclature: indicating the way by which indigenous people may become estranged from them through the influence of a new and dominant language and culture.<sup>212</sup> Elsewhere, Murray observes that 'Maps are both documents of commission and omission' and highlights how cultural and power asymmetry affect what is recorded on a map and why.<sup>213</sup>

It is apt that Finn's great sea voyage is closely contemporary with the setting of Brian Friel's play, *Translations*, which similarly considers how in Gaelic Ireland (whose Ordnance Survey naming conventions were subsequently adopted in Scotland) mapping and language work together to both reflect and create change. The play shows how military personnel were tasked to record Gaelic names for landscape features and to anglicize it. Local authorities consulted were generally landowners and men of professional class. The process being one which ensured distortion, omissions and misrepresentation.<sup>214</sup> Friel and Gunn are both concerned about the erosion of language but equally they recognise that change occurs in the relationship of languages to one another and that cultural traditions are not fixed. This is implied in the comment by a character who states, mixing ideas of maps, language and land, 'it can happen that a civilisation can be imprisoned in a linguistic contour which no longer

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<sup>211</sup> Alan Riach, *The Birlinn of Clanranald* (Newtyle: Kettillonia, 2015) p. 26.

<sup>212</sup> John Murray, *Literature of the Gaelic Landscape* pp. 186-99.

William Heather, 'A new and improved chart of the Hebrides. or Lewis Islands and adjacent coast of Scotland', 1804. National Library of Scotland, < <https://maps.nls.uk/coasts/chart/828> > [accessed 8 May 2023]

<sup>213</sup> John Murray/Iain Moireach, *Reading the Gaelic Landscape* (Dunbeath: Whittles, 2019), p. 17.

C J W Withers, 'Authorizing landscape: 'authority', naming and the Ordnance Survey's mapping of the Scottish Highlands in the nineteenth century' in *Journal of Historical Geography*, 26, 4 (2000) 532–554 < doi:10.1006/jhge.2000.0244 > [accessed 26 May 2022] (pp. 548-50.)

<sup>214</sup> Murray, *RGL*, p. 21.

matches the landscape of ... fact'.<sup>215</sup> Gunn is particularly forceful about how language and the arts must be grounded in a living tradition and, with reference to the Mod in 1937, not simply be 'a remembrance of the past'.<sup>216</sup>

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<sup>215</sup> Murray, *Reading the Gaelic Landscape*, p. 20.

Brian Friel, *Translations* (London: Faber and Faber, 1981), p. 52.

<sup>216</sup> Neil M. Gunn, 'The Ferry of the Dead', in Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Modernism and Nationalism*, p. 314.

## Chapter 3

### **‘The Universal Significance of Simple Things’**

The chapter’s title is taken from Alistair McCleery and Diarmid Gunn’s ‘Afterword’ in *Belief in Ourselves* (2010), and refers to what they describe as Gunn’s method of using the familiar everyday as the starting point from which to explore wider meaning and significance in the world.<sup>217</sup> The phrase reminds readers that Gunn continually returns to the everyday experiences of life as subjects which, given sufficient attention, are revealed as both important in themselves and as significant in the wider world.

This chapter aims to demonstrate a sociobiological element in Gunn’s conception of how people should live with each other and with the natural world. In so doing it highlights aspects of Gunn’s anarchist thinking which, while noted in critical works, is rarely foregrounded. It also aims to present a reading which offers ideas about how his aesthetic understanding of nature is constructed. The chapter opens with a consideration of his literary activism and looks at what he might be seen as writing for and against. This is followed by noting some examples of how his conception of landscape is reflected in the structure and language of his texts. The subsequent section discusses aspects of his conception of human nature and how this relates to the natural world. Following this there is a discussion of how his ideas correspond to environmental thinking in the twenty-first century and then examples from texts which address issues of animal sentience and killing are examined. Gunn’s writing is contrasted with that of a later writer, Kathleen Jamie, to consider how the meanings of the term ‘natural’ have changed over time before the final section explores some aspects of environmental aesthetics and again highlights the role of evolutionary thinking within these.

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<sup>217</sup> Alistair McCleery and Diarmid Gunn, ‘Afterword’ in Neil M. Gunn, *Belief in Ourselves* (Dunbeath: Whittles, 2010), p. 132.



## Literary activism

In describing the basis of his novel writing, Gunn states that he starts from a position which addresses the personal and the local. He advocates this as a general principle for authors to adopt, arguing that ‘What he [the writer] needs to know is his own region and his attitude towards it.’<sup>218</sup> This, he states, must be based upon respect for its location if the final work is to have real value. He adds that, if sufficiently deep and successful, this may provide the text with ‘the power to travel through all countries and cultures of the world.’ Gunn describes this as being characterised by kinship and authenticity and suggests that it requires him to write of people, places and situations that he intimately knows. While this could be seen as limiting a work’s scope Gunn cites the example of *The Green Isle of the Great Deep* to show how the known and familiar can be used to explore the great themes of the day and ‘include in its talk the basic problems of the planet’.<sup>219</sup> Set in an imagined dystopia the novel is grounded in the values and attitudes of the humane society Gunn had experienced in his childhood and it is these values which are presented as redeeming and transcending the bleak totalitarianism that threatened during the turmoil of the WWII.

Despite the apparently transformative societal changes that have occurred since they were published, the novels’ emphasis upon the fundamentals of life enables them to still be accessible and relevant to readers. Their writing focuses upon commonalities and shared experience, regardless of location and period. This is apparent in how, despite being set in specific periods, they constantly look back to see the past in the present and, by implication at least, the future. Time is shown as something circular and experiential rather than linear and empirical. Gunn’s style of presenting this is evident in *Highland River* where Kenn does not so much remember his childhood and war years as re-experience them in the process of reflecting on himself. Such a representation of time emphasises the continuance and recurrence of events, processes and concerns, albeit in evolving forms. In the context of

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<sup>218</sup> NMG, ‘The Novel at Home’, *Belief in Ourselves* (Dunbeath: Whittles, 2010), p. 116.

<sup>219</sup> NMG, ‘The Novel at Home’, p. 118.

writing as activism, this understanding militates against the characterisation of historical injustice or environmental damage as being simply opaque and detached remnants of a past that is no longer relevant but instead makes apparent the chains of causes and effects that continue to operate. In this way the past is shown to be an active and necessary constituent of contemporary situations.

Gunn's literary and political interests are clearly foregrounded in both his fiction and non-fiction and the writing process he describes underlines the importance to him of both personal experience and research of his subject.<sup>220</sup> While there exists considerable biographical material regarding his writing practice, and of which subjects were of concern to him, he appears to have been less forthcoming about why he wrote and for whom. Hart and Pick suggest a wish to reveal the history of social injustice in the Highlands and his experience of the poverty of the post-war economic depression encountered in Caithness as likely motives, with writing providing a means of creatively responding to these.<sup>221</sup> They also note how such experience might have driven a need to seek financial success as a means of achieving the security and independence so absent from life in that part of the country. The theme of independence arises again when Gunn refers to his role as a civil servant which, while affording financial security, potentially constrained his political work and how he might express his views.<sup>222</sup> Certainly, his essay 'Why I Write' (1951), which simultaneously acknowledges and downplays the varied factors that impacted upon his writing practice, suggests a mix of interacting ideas and motives. Gunn however, rejects overly analytic explanations and settles on the fascination with everyday lived experience and the basic need to express himself.<sup>223</sup>

Essays such as 'The Novel at Home' (1946) and 'Why I Write', do not actually mention readers other than critics and publishers.<sup>224</sup> Similarly, in 'On Reviewing' readers are referred to only

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<sup>220</sup> Hart and Pick, *NGHL*, p. 196.

<sup>221</sup> Hart and Pick, *NGHL*, p. 68.

<sup>222</sup> Hart and Pick, *NGHL*, p. 110.

<sup>223</sup> Gunn, 'Why I Write', *BO*, pp. 119-21.

<sup>224</sup> Gunn, 'The Novel at Home', pp. 115-8.

insofar as how they might be influenced by the nature and quality of a review: reviewing being something of which Gunn generally had a poor opinion. He argued it often missed the point due to criticism being dominated by intellectual and theoretical considerations rather than creative ones.<sup>225</sup> Authorial intent and critical response appear to be more fully recorded than readers' own reception and interpretation of his work. Other influences are noted, such as pressure from publishers to stick with proven success and the perceived demand to 'slaughter the poetry' in his prose.<sup>226</sup> Ultimately however, Gunn undermines attempts to over-analyse motivations by stating that writing is a creative and mysterious process which, like many other crafts, are innate and human. The action of 'making' is celebrated as a natural thing to do and the emphasis is on the writer rather than who he is writing for or what he thinks reading his work might mean. 'Why I Write' demonstrates Gunn's tendency, noted earlier, of discussing the complexities of a situation or act but then bringing these back to some essential principle. It also demonstrates how he is, at times, evasive or enigmatic about certain subjects, something perhaps understandable in a writer who, as discussed below, felt some pressure to write in a particular style.

Some of Gunn's letters indicate the pleasure and validation he experienced when his writing was understood and well received but they also convey ambivalence about making claims concerning his own literary impact, 'For I am not really a literary man. ...I play a little at it but I laugh a little too.'<sup>227</sup> He cites the contrast between himself and Hugh MacDiarmid to evidence this, despite MacDiarmid's expressed approval of his work. Writing in 1991, Richard Price makes the point that Gunn had not received the critical attention that might be expected and suggests that this might be due to him being seen as an 'unliterary' author. He makes a powerful observation, however, when he notes that 'Gunn's writing is so much of 'itself' that it is felt that research can hardly do anything but cloud his rather deft natural

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NMG, 'WIW', pp. 119-21.

<sup>225</sup> NMG, 'On Reviewing', pp. 112-3.

<sup>226</sup> NMG, 'WIW', p. 121.

<sup>227</sup> Neil M. Gunn, 'Letter to Diarmid Gunn', in *Neil M. Gunn: Selected Letters* (Edinburgh; Polygon, 1987), p. 250.

NMG, 'Letter to Nan Shepherd', *Selected Letters*, p. 13.

prose'. This does sum up the problem well but Price, rightly, also comes to the view that 'Gunn's intricacies still warrant discussion'.<sup>228</sup>

As with Hart and Pick, Alistair McCleery provides an indication of who Gunn's intended readership might be when he cites the various magazines and periodicals that he wrote for as well as the process by which he gradually became established and secure in his publishing.<sup>229</sup> McCleery too proposes that Gunn was motivated to write out of bitterness about conditions in the Highlands and by his affirmation of Scottish nationalism as a response: in which regard Gunn described his own writing as a contribution to the 'common cause'.<sup>230</sup> Despite a reluctance to make grand claims about the purpose or character of his writing there is a clear intention, as a prominent author of the interwar literary revival, to contribute to economic, political and artistic debates and offer 'perceived remedies for the crisis'.<sup>231</sup> These remedies are expressed in terms of the common experiences of small communities and small nations but are not limited by this scale. This would seem to suggest that Gunn's imagined readership was of a distinctly democratic character, included a literary audience but was not especially targeted at it, and was primarily those Scots who could bring about both a reconsideration of Highland history and make possible the economic changes he saw as essential.

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<sup>228</sup> Richard Price, *The Fabulous Matter of Fact* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1991) p. viii.

<sup>229</sup> Alistair McCleery, 'Scottish Literary Movements and Magazines', *The Bibliotech: A Scottish Journal of Bibliography and Allied Topics*, 23 (1998), 97-114, (p. 104-6)

<http://ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/scholarly-journals/scottish-literary-movements-magazines/docview/1298486729/se-2> [accessed 25 January 2023] (pp.104-6).

Hart and Pick, *NMGHL*, pp. 69-71.

McCleery, 'SLMM', p. 106.

<sup>230</sup> NMG. Letter to Douglas Young, *NMGSL*, p. 69.

<sup>231</sup> Margery Palmer McCulloch, *Modernism and Nationalism*, p.221.

## Circles and Serpents

Gunn's writing of life and landscape have characteristics that can be read as suggesting a phenomenological attitude of mind, particularly with regard to subjects associated with the concept of 'dwelling', with its emphasis upon embodiment, place and experience. But while there is arguably a level of consensus as to the significance of dwelling as a concept within ecocriticism, certain aspects are viewed by some as inherently reactionary and, at a societal level, leading to potentially dangerous consequences.<sup>232</sup> Jonathan Bate argues that the use of the term 'ancestral', a common Gunn reference, should serve as a warning and suggests that a key question is whether the historical association between the Heideggerian concept of dwelling and Nazism is a necessary or contingent one. More generally Bate criticises the translation of ecopoesis into political frameworks, something that is argued in this work to occur in Gunn novels through their combining of pervasive and grounded poetic experience with political critique.<sup>233</sup> Bate rejects such contextual 'enframing', stating that ecopoetics must listen to the 'voice of Art' and that its integration within political frameworks is bound to be hopeless.<sup>234</sup>

Terry Eagleton challenges its validity from another direction, arguing that phenomenology is an insufficient method as it does not 'have any relevance to how I live 'historically' in the sense of being bound up with particular individuals, actual social relations and concrete institutions.'<sup>235</sup> This however would seem to be contradicted by the framing employed in the novels which possess an ecopoetic character but locate it within analyses of historical and social relations. Gunn's writing, despite its concern with the past and traditions, does not appear to lead towards the fascist conclusion that Bate is concerned with nor does it exclude those factors which Eagleton argues are key to understanding life historically. On the contrary, Gunn again takes a characteristically complementary approach and the novels

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<sup>232</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, p. 122.

<sup>233</sup> Jonathan Bate, *The Song of the Earth* (London: Picador, 2000), pp. 267-8.

<sup>234</sup> JB, SE, p. 268-9.

<sup>235</sup> Terry Eagleton, *Literary Theory: An Introduction*, (Oxford: Blackwell, 2008) p. 57.

combine the poetic, the spiritual and the political to draw attention to the consequences for his characters of history and changing social relations through their actual experience of dwelling. This blending of the poetic with the political underpins the texts and Gunn's recurring use of synthesis, in both style and content, is a highly distinctive mark of his writing.

The relationship between human ecology and the ideologies underpinning the devastation of the WWII is the subject of *The Green Isle of the Great Deep*, with their two traditional characters placed in a totalitarian 'paradise', and then considers the unfolding of the resulting conflict of values and cultures. The central idea of the novel is examined through the framework of Celtic mythology and the 'otherworld' which is employed to examine starkly different worldviews and to expose how an all-powerful state, benign or malign, changes those who live within it. The transition from home to the otherworld is heralded with references to mythic symbols such as hazelnuts, salmon, river and its hidden underwater entrance.<sup>236</sup> The decision to use myth, culture and the natural world as the literary medium of the text illustrates the 'language' of images and meanings that Gunn sees as best suited to encompass both individual experience and its whole world context. It is an assertive decision which implies that not only can it carry the weight and scope of its considerable subject but also that this specific cultural 'language' is actually what is best suited to the task. This idea of its fit rests on the understanding that such myth is part of the common heritage of both the novels' protagonists and their readership and suggests that expression and understanding of the complexities of its subjects are best achieved within that particular frame.

Gunn specifically refers to the technique he employs in the novel as the setting of a problem to be explored, with the result that the novel works as both thought experiment and literary activism.<sup>237</sup> The same approach is substantially evident in the other novels considered here where characters strive to live ethically and meaningfully in the face of change and adversity

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<sup>236</sup> NMG, GIGD, pp. 16-9.

<sup>237</sup> NMG, 'The Novel at Home', p. 194.

driven by the aggressive capitalism of their day. McCulloch observes that Gunn's novels portray good and evil as:

two separate entities, both in individual experience and human life as a whole: the one stemming from a primitive, simple, communal life pattern; the other from the intellectualism, individualism, urbanisation and power-seeking philosophies of modern life.<sup>238</sup>

She suggests this is an overly simplistic and evasive attitude that does not take account of the complexities of social organisation. It is a powerful criticism which draws attention to some of the central problems concerning the works. Gunn's novels are deeply engaged with ideas of what is natural and with how personal and collective fulfilment are dependent upon living in a 'natural' way. Wellbeing and happiness are closely associated with traditional modes of living and this worldview is evident in representations of characters and situations alike. This becomes the framing which creates the binary distinctions McCulloch describes. It has the effect of amplifying the novels' activist tone but potentially undermines their effect as representations are open to the criticism of being two-dimensional or unrealistic. Such an impediment is perhaps inevitable, however, in a literary style which draws so heavily on symbolism and deep opposition to perceived social injustice. The novels are intended to put forward a narrative that challenges those prevailing ones which were equally polarised and which characterised Highland life as possessing little worth retaining: suggesting that the general changes of the past two hundred years were not only inevitable but desirable. Seen predominantly as novels of opposition and advocacy, therefore, Gunn's characterisation arguably becomes more understandable and less jarring. They are certainly helped by readings of those of his essays which contextualise the themes of the novels and consider them in a more factual and historical manner.<sup>239</sup> These essays are often more nuanced and explanatory in ways which are not always as evident in the portrayals of some of the novels' protagonists.

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<sup>238</sup> McCulloch, NNG, p. 81.

<sup>239</sup> For example: 'Belief in Ourselves', *BiO*, p.70.

## ‘Human nature’

In ecocritical terms Gunn’s stance might be described as a social-ecological one. In this ecological problems are seen as having their origins in aspects of social and economic relations: in particular hierarchy, limitless capitalist growth and human domination of nature.<sup>240</sup> Such a position reflects Gunn’s affinity with the ideas of Pyotr Kropotkin, whose influence is apparent in the writing but which is complemented by a strongly spiritual element.<sup>241</sup> Critical appraisals of Gunn have tended to refer in passing to his ideas about anarchist thought and much greater attention has been given to his support of nationalism. However, it is argued here that anarchist thinking plays a central part in his critique of both the value of traditional Highland life and the threats it faced.

In a 1958 letter to Alexander Reid, Gunn states that ‘anarchism in some form has always seemed the final hope for humans who wanted to retain maximum individuality or freedom, consistent with duty to community’.<sup>242</sup> Anarchist concerns are regularly present in his works, which draw attention to the appropriation of the land by a few, stress the importance of mutuality and highlight oppression as inherent in hierarchy.<sup>243</sup> The influence of Kropotkin’s writings can be inferred in several ways. It is notable that in *The Conquest of Bread* (1892) Kropotkin dedicated chapters to fundamentals of life such as food, shelter and clothing, with the satisfactory provision of these argued as being a necessary pre-condition for achieving social change.<sup>244</sup> These concerns resonate strongly with Gunn’s own and both writers emphasise how such everyday matters sit within wider contexts and possess distinctive histories and meanings. Some of these are argued to be easily apparent and others only

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<sup>240</sup> Murray Bookchin, *Remaking Society: Pathways to a Green Future* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), pp. 154-5.

<sup>241</sup> Greg Garrard, *Ecocriticism*, pp. 31-2.

Alistair McCleery, Diarmid Gunn, ‘Afterword’, footnote, p. 133.

<sup>242</sup> J. B. Pick, *SL*, p. 141.

<sup>243</sup> J. B. Pick, *SL*, pp. 57-8.

<sup>244</sup> Petr Alexseevich Kropotkin, ‘The Conquest of Bread’, *The Collected Works of Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin* (Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: IntelLex Corporation, 2021), <<https://pm-nlx-com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=kropotkin/kropotkin.08.xml;chunk.id=kro.v8.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=kro.v8.1;brand=default>> [Accessed 5.July 2023]



revealed through analysis and explanation. Both also argue for the importance of science and technology in developing food production but insist that its use should be in accordance with particular economic and social arrangements. When Kropotkin writes that ‘Steam, electricity, the heat of the sun, and the breath of the wind, will ere long be pressed into service’ he not only describes the potential of technology in agriculture, he is also pointing towards the important conflicts of interest that continued throughout and beyond Gunn’s lifetime and which make up large parts of ecological debate about ownership and benefit in the twenty-first century.<sup>245</sup>

In *Mutual Aid: A Factor of Evolution* (1902) Kropotkin sets out a theory of mutual aid and cooperation that has its roots in Darwinism and the growing scientific knowledge of the late nineteenth century.<sup>246</sup> It is an idea that resonates with both Gunn’s analysis of the material arrangements of community living and the ethical and spiritual basis that underpins it. Mutual aid through cooperation is argued by Kropotkin to be evident in the behaviour of most animals and to be natural and innate. He proposes that historical conditions caused individual struggle, institutional competition and exploitation to become the norm and be perceived as a natural state. By highlighting the extensive existence of cooperation in the natural world Kropotkin challenges this assumption and argues that such relations are neither natural nor desirable.<sup>247</sup> This is not to deny the existence of competition and violence in nature but instead suggests that it need not be the inevitable and predominant basis of general social relations. Mutual aid is one of the most important and prominent themes of the novels and serves as an anchoring point to which Gunn repeatedly returns.

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<sup>245</sup>Kropotkin, ‘Chapter 5, Food’, VII, ‘The Conquest of Bread’, *The Collected Works of Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin* (<<https://pm-nlx-com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=kropotkin/kropotkin.08.xml;chunk.id=kro.v8.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=kro.v8.1;brand=default>> [Accessed 5 July 2023])

<sup>246</sup> Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin, ‘Mutual Aid: A factor of evolution’, *The Collected Works of Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin* (Charlottesville, Virginia, USA: InteLex Corporation, 2021), (<<https://pm-nlx-com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=kropotkin/kropotkin.08.xml;chunk.id=kro.v8.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=kro.v8.1;brand=default>> [Accessed 5 July 2023])

<sup>247</sup> Ruth Kinna, ‘Mutual aid: Kropotkin’s theory of human capacity’ *Roar*, 8 February 2021, <https://roarmag.org/essays/kropotkin-mutual-aid/> [Accessed 5 July 2023].

An example of what Gunn considers to be a distortion of the natural is presented in the passage of *Butcher's Broom* which imagines Mr Heller reflecting on the 'improvements' he and his associates have imposed and within the narration Gunn describes their underpinning practice and ideology and its resulting harm.<sup>248</sup> In challenging this, and contrasting it with traditional cultural life, Gunn adopts Kropotkin's position which states that:

the nucleus of mutual-support institutions, habits, and customs remains alive with the millions; it keeps them together; and they prefer to cling to their customs, beliefs, and traditions rather than to accept the teachings of a war of each against all.<sup>249</sup>

However, while the novel is an acknowledgement that the 'nucleus' does indeed remain alive, and subsequently reappears in *The Silver Darlings*, it is shown to be pressed almost to the point of destruction, where some Highlanders turn on themselves.<sup>250</sup> There is little naivety or sentimentalism in this account of the value of mutual aid and Gunn's realism regarding the challenges facing modern modes of mutuality in the Highlands is evident in his article for *Anarchy* (1968), 'A Footnote on Co-Operation' which states its necessity but notes the lack of confidence that it can be achieved in the context of the fishing industry.<sup>251</sup>

In his fiction, Gunn's most explicit anarchist references are in the views voiced by 'The Philosopher' in *The Serpent* (1943).<sup>252</sup> Here Gunn roots his character's anarchism in the centuries-old social relations of people working the land, noting both communal activities such as peat cutting and the annual rotation of run-rigs. All of this being managed by the community itself. As in the letter to Reid noted above, Gunn's character argues that this

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<sup>248</sup> *BB*, pp. 410-2.

<sup>249</sup> Petr Alexseevich Kropotkin, 'Chapter 7, Mutual Aid amongst ourselves' (Final paragraph), 'Mutual Aid: A factor of evolution', *The Collected Works of Petr Alekseevich Kropotkin* <<https://pm-nlx-com.ezproxy.lib.gla.ac.uk/xtf/view?docId=kropotkin/kropotkin.08.xml;chunk.id=kro.v8.1;toc.depth=1;toc.id=kro.v8.1;brand=default>>

<sup>250</sup> *BB*, pp. 361-2

<sup>251</sup> Neil M. Gunn, 'A Footnote on Cooperation', *Anarchy* No. 86. 94-128, (1968) <https://files.libcom.org/files/Anarchy%20No86.compressed.pdf> (116)

<sup>252</sup> Neil M. Gunn, *The Serpent* (Edinburgh: Canongate, 1997)

provided ‘a true balance between the maximum freedom of the individual and the common welfare of all’ due to an absence of bosses, tyrants, bureaucrats and profit drivers.<sup>253</sup> In the passage Gunn again uses his characters to show oppositions that draw attention to the interplay between economics, the environment and its inhabitants. Part of this technique is to refer to characters by their symbolic or actual role, in this case as philosopher and shepherd, and through condensed set pieces and dialogues draw attention to power imbalances. In the novel *The Philosopher* anticipates the criticism that the examples given are so specific and historical that they can have no contemporary relevance. He responds by rejecting the idea of a return to the past and instead states that the principle of mutual aid needs to be integrated with technology and so, using the Darwinian concept, ‘evolve the old into the new’.<sup>254</sup> It does not seem unreasonable to assume that Gunn might have been encouraged by the later examples of this principle which are arguably found in the work of community trusts across Scotland. Their focus on work, such as electricity production and forestry, that are precisely the type of development that Gunn so energetically campaigned for.<sup>255</sup>

## Mid Green?

As an author concerned with Scotland’s wider political and literary scene in the 1930s and 1940s, as well as specifically Highland issues, it follows that the political character of the novels reflects debates about capitalism, socialism and nationalism. These were obviously articulated and understood in the context of their day and constituted a well-established discourse within which debate could take place. However, a comparable framework, outside

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<sup>253</sup> NMG, *The Serpent*, pp. 198-9.

<sup>254</sup> NMG, *The Serpent*, p. 199.

<sup>255</sup> James Cook, ‘The Highland haven insulated from rising energy prices’, BBC News Scotland, 29 October 2022, < <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/uk-scotland-63402811> > [Accessed 10 July 2023]  
 Isle of Eigg Heritage Trust, ‘About Eigg’ < <http://isleofeigg.org/> > [Accessed 10 July 2023]

of indigenous cultures, with which to consider related environmental concepts was not then in general use in the same way. Writing in the 1940s, Aldo Leopold notes:

There is as yet no ethic dealing with man's relation to land and to the animals and plants which grow upon it. The land-relation is still strictly economic, entailing privileges but not obligations.<sup>256</sup>

Leopold's argument effectively captures the attitude of Mr Heller noted above but the position Gunn himself takes is reflected in more recent criticism which argues that 'Economists see environment as within the economy, when actually economy is enclosed within environment.'<sup>257</sup> As Diarmid Gunn and Alistair McCleery argue with regard to Gunn's essay writing, 'While the essays are very much situated in their time, their themes are ageless and hold strong relevance to the world today.'<sup>258</sup> The (largely) shared language of environmental debate now in use was not accessible to Gunn and so environmental concerns in his works tend to be primarily expressed in an economic, social and spiritual context rather than explicitly ecological terms: the spiritual elements being particularly evident in what Scott Lyall describes as Gunn's 'Numinous Landscapes', characterised by 'deification of nature' and 'veneration of ancestors'.<sup>259</sup>

A passage which illustrates Gunn's economic framing of the environment occurs in *The Drinking Well* where he brings together a series of issues concerning land use.<sup>260</sup> Here, ownership, livestock markets, environmental damage, population decline and the science of hill sheep farming are woven together. The focus is on how to improve financial returns

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<sup>256</sup> Aldo Leopold, 'The Land Ethic' in *A Sand County Almanac* (London: Penguin Classics, 2020), pp. 156 – 7.

<sup>257</sup> Ulrich Loening, 'The Attitude of Human Ecology' in *Radical Human Ecology* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2012), p. 12. (pp. 1-23). <[https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315076848\\_The\\_Attitude\\_of\\_Human\\_Ecology](https://www.researchgate.net/publication/315076848_The_Attitude_of_Human_Ecology)> [accessed 14 March 2023].

<sup>258</sup> Gunn and McCleery, 'Afterword', *BiO*, p. 133.

<sup>259</sup> Scott Lyall, 'Pagan Modernism: First World War and Spiritual Revival in Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song* and Neil M. Gunn's *Highland River*' in David A. Rennie. *Scottish Literature and World War I* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh Scholarship Online, 2021) 1-16 <DOI:10.3366/edinburgh/9781474454599.003.0009> [accessed 17 August 2023] (p. 6.)

<sup>260</sup> NMG, *DW*, pp. 410-14.

through better management but it sits within a context of balancing interests and sustainability. Once again Gunn has a protagonist put forward suggestions about how commercial and environmental obstacles might be overcome in a way that attempts to avoid the restrictions resulting from the farmers' limited ability to control the product of their work. Regardless of the technical merits of the specific proposal, what is noteworthy is that it portrays the farmers as one part of a complex ecosystem who are dependent on working with the natural world rather than simply exhausting it. As such, it stands in contrast to the equally science based but in the long term environmentally degrading influences driving events in *Butcher's Broom*.<sup>261</sup> Discussion of environmental themes therefore do not occur in the terms that are common today but as a part of the pervasive human ecology which Gunn insists on. The texts do recognise wider environmental issues but they foreground and prioritise material and spiritual human interests. Gunn's stance is exemplified by his remarks in 'Gentleman-The Tourist!' where, in the absence of alternatives, he advocates in favour of industry over 'scenic' concerns. He would prefer a different option but his reference to 'pylons marching across the breadth of Ireland' seems to not just imply them as necessary but, in that context, as pleasing.<sup>262</sup>

In terms of contemporary positions, Patrick Curry summarises this type of approach as 'mid-green', a stance described as being 'non-anthropocentric but not fully ecocentric'.<sup>263</sup> Curry suggests that this means that value is not restricted to human beings but it does not extend to all ecosystems. In the texts however, exactly what constitutes human interests is contested as Gunn repeatedly contrasts his vision of sustainable and ethical living with the unrestrained exploitation he opposes. Questions of recognising and balancing interests are inherent concerns in both modern environmental ethics and Gunn's writing and the following section considers some examples from an ethics perspective.

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<sup>261</sup> *BB*, pp. 163-4.

<sup>262</sup> McCulloch, MN, p.310.

<sup>263</sup> Patrick Curry, *Ecological Ethics: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2011), p. 71.

## Duties

Leopold, broadly a contemporary of Gunn, refers to environmental ethics as a potential form of ‘community instinct’. It enables a community to meet new challenges that require the deferment of immediate reactions, including those which Gunn explores, where short-term exploitation and long-term sustainability conflict.<sup>264</sup> In developing his thought Leopold suggests that a balance is to be sought between individual and community interest and that underpinning that balance was recognition of the need for reciprocity. This land ethic ‘simply enlarges the boundaries of the community’ to include elements of the wider natural environment.<sup>265</sup>

Much of the motivation cited for its development rests upon recognition of the importance of eco-systems as open systems, potentially affected by a multitude of factors, rather than closed systems which are concerned only with the interests of an individual species. It follows therefore that impact on one part will inevitably have consequences elsewhere. Framing the human and non-human environment as elements of an interacting community, one that is also temporal as it extends to the deep past and into the future, has obvious parallels with Gunn’s writing.<sup>266</sup> As reciprocity implies duties it is useful to consider how these are presented within his texts. Although the writing provides opportunities to explore a wide range of environmental duties it is only possible here to consider one, the issue of sentience, something which is argued to ‘underpin the entire animal welfare movement.’<sup>267</sup>

In his introduction to *Highland Pack*, first published in 1939, Gunn describes the anthology of essays as ‘essentially impressions from facts rather than objective descriptions of any kind of

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<sup>264</sup> Leopold, *SCA*, p. 156.

<sup>265</sup> Leopold, *SCA*, p. 157.

<sup>266</sup> As in the initial description of the Riasgan settlement in *BB*, pp. 14-22.

<sup>267</sup> Helen Proctor, ‘Animal Sentience: Where Are We and Where Are We Heading?’ in *Animals*, 2012, 2, pp. 628-639; <doi:10.3390/ani2040628> [accessed 4 June, 2023] (p. 628).

natural history observed by the scientific eye.’<sup>268</sup> The articles, like his fiction, bring together elements of reportage and reflection and provide opportunities to consider how encounters with the natural world are described and understood. The image of an outsider arriving with news, books or small articles for sale has a concrete significance as part of actual Highland life but it also provides a particular cultural symbol. It suggests the potential depth of small or seemingly inconsequential things and implies connections to a wider world. Hart and Pick’s biography of Gunn describes how two books obtained from a travelling bookseller, on the recurring subjects of Celtic myth and economic history, provided invaluable reference material throughout his writing career.<sup>269</sup> Similarly, the metaphor of the pack suggests the need, in the uncertain days of the WWII, to draw upon a shared past and the fundamentals of lived experience.<sup>270</sup> Colporteur and packman both introduce a different perspective, or draw attention to something important and the essays are offered to their reader as small packages to be unwrapped and examined.

Gunn did not write in explicit terms about sentience or the moral standing of animals but several of the essays represent expressions of ethical positions and problems. ‘Death of a Lamb’ (1943), explores the question of how to respond to animal suffering and works as a problem by which to examine the merits and implications of possible responses.<sup>271</sup> It also highlights the role of conscience and the dissonance created by potential conflict between how one might be expected to feel or act and how one actually responds.

The essay concerns an incident where a petrified lamb is discovered having been pecked by a crow, to the point that it is unlikely to survive. The account focuses upon the problem of the lamb’s suffering and there are literary elements that enhance its force. The account is narrated in the third person which contributes to a distancing effect in a scene that, by contrast, is characterised by feelings of distress and ambivalence. Such distancing is

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<sup>268</sup> Neil M. Gunn, ‘Introduction’ in *Highland Pack* (London: Faber and Faber, 1989), p. 11.

<sup>269</sup> Hart and Pick, *NGHL*, p. 52. (One of which is understood to be T W Rolleston’s *Myths and Legends of the Celtic Race*)

<sup>270</sup> *HP*, p. 12.

<sup>271</sup> NMG, ‘Death of a Lamb’, *HP*, pp.205-8.

characteristic of Gunn's writing and is often used as the means by which a protagonist steps away from himself to examine memories and feelings. Similar to that noted earlier, it is sometimes signalled through references to individuals as 'the man' or 'the boy' rather than 'I' or by name and its use is particularly evident in *Highland River* and *The Atom of Delight*.<sup>272</sup> The technique has been described as 'intense immediacy and a sort of enclosed detachment' and has the filmic quality of examining a scene from a position removed from the viewpoint of the character involved, 'where the story is not told as *remembered* but as *seen*'.<sup>273</sup> The opening composition of man, crow and lamb, is highly visual and disturbing and is easy to imagine as a deeply unsettling painting or tableau. There is a strong sense of symbolism in their relation to each other and the juxtaposition of the powerful feelings evoked within Gunn and the shepherd's indifference have a nightmarish or fable-like quality.

The incident is described in a brief four pages and again works as a set-piece, highlighting some environmental ethical dilemmas. It opens with an expression of anger at the sight of a crow, personified as cruel and revolting, eating alive a young lamb, an animal often symbolic of innocence and peace. The man feels reluctantly compelled to intervene but his actions are constrained. Chasing away the crow will only result in it returning later so this would simply delay an undesirable outcome. He feels an obligation to put the lamb out of its misery but as it is someone else's property he believes he does not have a right to do so. He feels a duty to the animal to relieve its suffering but he believes that once he has informed the shepherd then his responsibility will end. The 'responsible' shepherd is reluctant to act, appearing indifferent and avoidant. The man is worried that his own concern for the animal's pain is unmanly and the incident has, in ways not understood by him, been highly destabilising and miserable. The short scene offers an insight into the complexity of human relations with animals, as the presenting problem becomes submerged in wider social and psychological influences. The latter point seems to have a particular significance for Gunn who feels distressed by witnessing animal suffering but is also disturbed by his own reaction to it, something he expresses in language of sexuality and gender. Framing reactions in this way

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<sup>272</sup> NMG, *HR*, p. 103.

NMG, *AD*, p. 26.

<sup>273</sup> Francis Russell Hart, 'Introduction' in NMG *The Serpent*, p. ix.



implies assumptions about gender differences as well as an anxious questioning of their validity. It is a revealing moment that reminds readers of a gendered aspect to Gunn's writing of nature. It is very much seen from the standpoint of a man of a particular place and time but the traditional associations of femininity and closeness to nature (suggested by healing figures such as Dark Mairi) and masculinity and the mastery of nature (exemplified in the 'male' activities of hunting and fishing) are shown as insecure and troubling.

The essay provides insight into how Gunn regards certain moral duties concerning animals and draws attention to their actual and potential symbolism. First published in the *Scots Magazine* during WWII, it refers to the setting as a 'battleground' with crow and lamb being predator and prey.<sup>274</sup> Gunn notes the grey-black colour of the bird and describes it as 'sinister' and 'loathsome'. It evokes 'bitter anger' and 'queer undefined hatred' within him. The vehemence of the response invites consideration and it is notable that, symbolically complex, the crow possesses multiple meanings and has particular associations with violence and death.<sup>275</sup> Such extreme feelings encourage the inference that the scene, set in wartime, has to do with much more than its immediately presenting content.

The crow, the lamb and the human create a hierarchy which implies judgements about duties, responsibilities and privileges. There is little dispute that there are moral duties to the man, and arguably the lamb, but there are none shown to the crow. The moral divide between the species is evident.<sup>276</sup> Their standing varies considerably and the position of the lamb is complicated by the fact that, while as a sentient animal it has value in its own right, it is someone's property and so has another value to be taken into account. In addition, a lamb in a period of wartime food and wool shortage has further significance. The overlapping of issues

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<sup>274</sup> NMG, 'DL', p. 295.

<sup>275</sup> Uta Maria Jürgens, Paul M. W. Hackett, 'Wolves, Crows, and Spiders: An eclectic Literature Review inspires a Model explaining Humans' similar Reactions to ecologically different Wildlife' in *Frontiers in Environmental Science*, Vol. 9, (2022) 1-17, <doi: 10.3389/fenvs.2021.593501> [20 August 2023] (pp. 6-9)  
Bateman, Purser, *WttW*, p. 430.

<sup>276</sup> Victoria C. Krings, Kristof Dhont, and Alina Salmen, 'The Moral Divide Between High- and Low-Status Animals: The Role of Human Supremacy Beliefs', *Anthrozoos*, 34:6, (2021) 787-802, <DOI:10.1080/08927936.2021.1926712> [18 July 2023] (pp. 787-8)

of symbolism, moral standing and property value were referred to in the earlier discussion of sporting estates and King Brude and they continue to dominate the still controversial field of red deer management in Scotland where animal welfare, 'iconic' symbolism, environmental objectives and property rights all coincide.<sup>277</sup>

The lamb's standing is such that it is understood by Gunn that he has a direct duty to prevent its unnecessary suffering but he is not pleased to have the opportunity to help and would rather not be there. It is also not clear just how significant that duty is in comparison with others. In the scene he finds the shepherd within easy walking distance but it raises the question as to just how much farther his sense of duty might require him to go or what distance would be sufficient to imply the permission necessary to allow him to euthanise the lamb himself. Such uncertainty implies the same subjectivity and contingency which was evident in the contrasting attitudes of Angus and Geoffrey towards the injured stag in *Second Sight*. It also had an unsatisfactory resolution and situated the issue of its animal suffering in the wider context of problematic human relations and conflicts.<sup>278</sup>

What does emerge from his actions, however, is his over-riding but reluctant sense of direct duty to the shepherd. This may relate to an acknowledgement of property rights or respect for the role and duties of the shepherd as an agent of the owner. Either way these are more important than the right, or duty, to promptly end unnecessary suffering. It is, however, interesting to compare the attitude to property expressed in this essay with that which is evident in numerous other examples of his writing where poaching is portrayed very positively. The duty to 'respect' property is therefore a nuanced one and, as Gunn puts it, considered to be 'a matter of the laws of the tribe'.<sup>279</sup>

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<sup>277</sup>The Newsroom, 'Gamekeepers protest against red deer cull', *Scotsman*, 30 March 2004

<<https://www.scotsman.com/news/gamekeepers-protest-against-red-deer-cull-2458995>> [accessed 16 July 2023]

<sup>278</sup> NMG, *SS*, p. 220.

<sup>279</sup> NMG, *Selected Letters*, p. 82.

The essay invites readers to consider the ‘truth’ of its assumptions and implicitly asks them what might they do in that situation. The encounter may seem to be of relatively little consequence but given the force with which Gunn ends the piece, using language such as ‘misery’ and ‘guilt’, it clearly had significance and the question of what obligations exist with regard to animal suffering is an important one. It is a theme that Gunn revisits on a number of occasions and had in fact formed the basis of another *Highland Pack* essay, ‘A Rabbit in a Snare’, which also raises the question of animals as property.<sup>280</sup> In that scenario compassion and a sense of duty to the animal prevail. However, concern is again voiced that these feelings are sentimental and irrational. Both essays frame their subjects as dilemmas and it is interesting to note how they have persisted over subsequent decades.<sup>281</sup>

The situations themselves seem quite simple but they contain quite fundamental ethical problems which, while aspects of their writing date them, are still effective thought experiments and are helped by Gunn being placed directly within them. The process is similar to how he treats political situations in his fiction but they differ in an important way from the historical and economic scenarios which Gunn uses to raise awareness of human exploitation and suffering. While those tend to be quite definite about the moral certainties to be drawn from them, there is more ambivalence and questioning expressed about matters that pertain to questions of environmental ethics.

Exploration of the status and symbolism of animals is a recurring theme of the novels. Examples reveal how they are conceived in themselves and also how they constitute part of human culture. In a scene in *The Silver Darlings* the four-year-old Finn is entranced by the sight of white butterflies.<sup>282</sup> Fascinated by their appearance he asks a series of questions of his mother, which in its unpredictably childish way, strays into questions about God and death. Finn finds the adult explanation unsatisfactory and later a chase leads to his catching

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<sup>280</sup> Neil M. Gunn, ‘A Rabbit in a Snare’, *HP*, pp. 180-3.

<sup>281</sup> Scottish Government, *Protecting Scotland’s wildlife* < <https://www.gov.scot/news/protecting-scotlands-wildlife-1/> > [Accessed 4 September 2023]

<sup>282</sup> *SD*, pp. 86 – 100.

and intentionally killing one. The passage revolves around a number of anthropomorphic ideas and while it is presented through Finn's perceptions and feelings it is situated within a context that draws on the subjects of that earlier conversation. The butterfly is presented as indifferent to the child's presence but its movement, resulting in the boy tripping, is construed as deliberate, provoking him to pursue and crush it. Its name is contentious as while it is commonly referred to as 'Grey Fool' (amadan-leith) it has an older name, 'God's Fool' (amadan-De) considered blasphemous by some.<sup>283</sup> Its meaning is also enhanced by the butterfly's role in Gaelic charms and myth, including an association with the spirit or soul at the point of death.<sup>284</sup>

The act of killing engenders overwhelming and incomprehensible feelings and his fear increases when another butterfly is noticed and it is suggested, 'there's God's fool watching you.'<sup>285</sup> Finn's mother reflects that in the killing of the butterfly there is a biblical-like beginning of the end of innocence, as an understanding of death and of good and evil begins to form.<sup>286</sup> In the overall scheme of things a young child impulsively killing an insect is a minor act but here it is used as a metaphor to foreshadow the potential for other forms of violence and loss. This ritual-like episode in Finn's life (the first of many) can stand alone however it is situated within a chapter that surrounds it with adult fears of death. Catrine imagines Finn may have drowned in the burn and her caution to Roddie that he should 'take care of the sea' alludes to the earlier loss of Finn's father (*SD*, p. 104). In this cultural context the presence of the butterflies is a further reminder of mortality.

Gunn's writing of scenes involving the suffering or killing of animals suggests a mix of attitudes, some of which can appear contradictory. He refers often to the pleasures of hunting and fishing and, while it is usually in the context of acquiring food for the family or community, there are also occasions where it is simply for the pleasure of the act. In *Highland*

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<sup>283</sup> *SD*, p. 97.

<sup>284</sup> John Gregorson Campbell, *The Gaelic Otherworld*, Ronald Black ed. (Edinburgh: Birlinn, 2005), p. 225, p. 265.

<sup>285</sup> *SD*, p. 96.

<sup>286</sup> *SD*, p. 100.

*River* young Kenn catches birds with a piece of net.<sup>287</sup> The description records the excitement and delight generated in catching and examining them but it then moves into reflections about the pleasure of letting the bird go. Reference is made to a story of Leonardo da Vinci buying caged birds so that he could enjoy releasing them and the narration explores more abstract ideas of freedom and captivity. The image of a child playing at catch and release is similar to the behaviour of other young animals where they learn hunting skills necessary in adult life but in the case of the child however this comes with the knowledge of the pain and distress experienced by animals and so can be disturbing.

The potential for callousness or deliberate cruelty in childhood is shown in another passage of *Highland River* where Kenn and Beel hunt for rabbits.<sup>288</sup> Their method involves attaching a salmon hook to a long stick, reaching into a crack in a rock and turning the hook into the rabbit's fur. It is then pulled out, squealing. As is often the case in such passages, the description of the action ends with reflection and judgement. While the excitement of the hunt drives out all other considerations at the time, Kenn later experiences other feelings. He feels as he imagines the rabbit might but it is his sense of satisfaction at his hunting success that ultimately dominates. As in the essays about the lamb and the rabbit, concern is expressed that feelings of 'softness' suggest some kind of flaw. Gunn expands on this idea when he states 'the hunting instinct is one of the strongest in my blood ... But as a sport (shooting) it will never be of any use to me now. ... It sometimes makes me involuntarily shudder'.<sup>289</sup> He goes on to state that a person should say to themselves 'What I am not prepared to kill myself, I shall not eat' and sees his attitude as being based on a wider issue of personal responsibility, which he regards as having diminished as technology increasingly creates a remoteness between actor and act.<sup>290</sup> Gunn's argument is that of one who not only kills to eat but is also prepared to butcher and cook the food. There is an important connection throughout the process and he implies that such direct involvement makes the act more morally acceptable. This contrasts with the disjuncture described in *Second Sight*, and

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<sup>287</sup> *HR*, pp.74-5

<sup>288</sup> *HR*, pp.173-5.

<sup>289</sup> Hart and Pick, *NGHL*, p. 171.

<sup>290</sup> Hart and Pick, *NGHL*, p. 171.

still evident on sporting estates today, where ‘guests’ shoot from a distance and the deer is then processed by others. Gunn’s comment was made in 1939 but it remains relevant to current industrial production of animal-based food products, where the gap between production and consumption is, for most in Scotland, a large one and consumers are generally unaffected by the immediacy of animal welfare concerns.<sup>291</sup>

## Then and nearly now

The discussion above indicates some continuities between Gunn’s time and our own but there have obviously also been great changes in the intervening years and contrasting Gunn’s writing with that of a current writer can help draw out both continuities and changes. A brief comparison of two examples illustrates this. *Highland River* includes an account which imagines the migration of the salmon caught by Kenn in the novel’s famous opening scene.<sup>292</sup> It recalls the various stages of the salmon’s life and describes the environments through which it passes, as it moves from the depths of the Atlantic to the Well Pool where the encounter begins. The account blends the perspectives of both the boy and the adult and in its course expands to consider a range of associations and ideas about the essential, authentic nature of the natural world. The account is full of wonderment and reverence for both the creature itself and the mysterious environments through which it passes. The tone is mystical and lyrical and the narration centres on an imagining of the salmon’s perspective, giving it human-like emotions and urges. The passage ends with a return to the consciousness of young Kenn whose daydream is violently interrupted by the teacher: announcing the assertion of an empirical worldview over Kenn’s poetic one.

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<sup>291</sup> Simon P. James, *Environmental Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2015)

<sup>292</sup> *HR*, pp. 24-32

In her essay, 'The Braan Salmon', Kathleen Jamie also reflects upon the lifecycle of the salmon.<sup>293</sup> She describes a visit to the Hermitage, near Dunkeld, where she watches the salmon leaping in the River Braan, at Ossian's Hall, ostensibly returning to their spawning grounds. She recounts how she later discovers that what she had seen was not what was initially thought as the salmon had in fact been artificially introduced to the river and would never be able to return to the original site of their introduction. This frame provides the means with which to consider ideas of wildness and naturalness as well as what is valued and why.

Jamie's essay is stylistically very different from Gunn's expansive and poetic prose. It is cooler, more tentative and questioning, befitting the uncertain nature of its subject. Artificiality is immediately indicated through reference to its location at Ossian's Hall. T. C. Smout notes criticism by William Gilpin in 1776 of the Duke of Atholl for his attempts to 'embellish' the banks of the river in his estate and summarises Gilpin's view as 'the best of nature is above improvement.'<sup>294</sup> Ossian's Hall, a hall of mirrors, was dedicated to the 'poet' whose works of questionable authenticity were 'discovered' by James Macpherson and had so great an impact on the Romantic movement in Western Europe.<sup>295</sup> The shrine has since however become a 'quirky' venue, available for weddings and corporate events.<sup>296</sup>

The essay goes on to consider a conversation with a photographer about how deliberate technique is used to suggest the illusion of its own absence in a photograph. Two spectators suggest they may have just seen one salmon actually succeed in leaping the falls. Later, the discovery is made that that the salmon are ranched as part of a scientific research project and that such appearances have been deceiving.<sup>297</sup> With that, Jamie's understanding of what

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<sup>293</sup> Kathleen Jamie, 'The Braan Salmon' in *Findings* (London: Sort of Books, 2005), pp. 71-83.

<sup>294</sup> T. C. Smout, *Nature Contested* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2000), p. 22.

<sup>295</sup> Dafydd Moore (ed.), *The International Companion to James Macpherson and the Poems of Ossian* (Glasgow: Scottish Literature International, 2017), p. 3., p. 6.

<sup>296</sup> The National Trust for Scotland, 'The Hermitage' <<https://www.nts.org.uk/venue-hire/the-hermitage>> [accessed 24.May 2023]

<sup>297</sup> D. C. Stewart, S. McKelvey, J. D. Armstrong, *Ranching to the rod: an evaluation of adult returns from hatchery-reared Atlantic salmon smolts released in Scottish rivers*, Scottish Marine and Freshwater Science Report, Vol. 6, Number 5, (The

she has seen is reframed. She extends the idea of intervention in nature further by noting the birth of children to two women, one of which had been conceived through In Vitro Fertilisation (IVF) treatment. What she has learned leads to a consideration of the implications of the question of what natural means and she writes, ‘They say the day is coming - it may be already here - when there will be no wild creatures. That is when no species on the planet will be able to further itself without reference or negotiation with us.’<sup>298</sup>

Considering Gunn’s writing alongside that of Jamie exposes how unstable and unreliable the concepts of the ‘natural’ and the ‘wild’ have become since the publishing of Gunn’s 1937 novel. The combination of the Hermitage’s crafted Romantic picturesque and the concealed scientific manipulation of nature which Jamie presents is sharply at odds with the natural certainty Gunn celebrates in his poetic prose. Both writers reject the idea that nature is external to human ecology but Jamie’s attention is much more self-questioning and is echoed in Deborah Lilley’s point that ‘not only is the natural world under scrutiny, but the viewpoint from which it is seen is also subject to analysis.’<sup>299</sup>

In his writing Gunn frequently regrets the tendency for people to become estranged from the natural and suggests a clear distinction between it and the unnatural. This sense of loss is later made explicit by Bill McKibben when he states ‘We have deprived nature of its independence, and that is fatal to its meaning. Nature’s independence *is* its meaning; without it there is nothing but us’.<sup>300</sup> Jamie develops this thinking further again by implying that not only does the ‘unnatural’ go unrecognised but the meaning of the word natural has been redefined in ways that only become apparent when they are consciously examined: something hinted at in the ambiguous subtitle of the essay ‘Will the Wild Pass?’. She seems to remind us

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Scottish Government, 2015) < <https://marine.gov.scot/data/ranching-rod-evaluation-adult-returns-hatchery-reared-atlantic-salmon-smolts-released-scottish> > [Accessed 14 February 2023]

<sup>298</sup> Jamie, *Findings*, p. 79.

<sup>299</sup> Deborah Lilley, ‘Kathleen Jamie: rethinking the externality and idealisation of nature’ in *Green Letters*, 17:1, 16-26, <DOI: 10.1080/14688417.2012.750841> [accessed 27 March 2023] (p. 17.)

<sup>300</sup> Bill McKibben, quoted in, Simon P. James, *Environmental Philosophy: An Introduction* (Cambridge: Polity, 2015), p.125.



that definitions of the natural are human constructions and that there are criteria other than that suggested by McKibben by which judgements can be made. Conceptions of the 'wild' continue to exist but if non-interference and autonomy are no longer applicable then something else that is ascribed to nature must be involved. Gunn's literary work and activism evidence his pragmatism and keen involvement with material matters but the prominence in his work of myth, spirituality and aesthetics point towards other aspects that he regards as defining nature.

## Looking

As conceptions of nature and the natural have developed so too have those aspects of aesthetics which correspond to them. Gunn's 1940 essay 'On Looking at Things' sets out his thoughts on aspects of the role of beauty and the part played by the senses and attention in perception and memory.<sup>301</sup> As might be expected it highlights subjects discussed previously in relation to the ideas of dwelling and inscape: experience, knowledge, skill and how the external world extends into an individual's mind and personality. The term 'dwelling' encompasses the phenomenological sense of being in a particular place and time but it also includes the linked meaning of spending time and attention on something.<sup>302</sup> In his essay Gunn recalls a conversation with an artist who stresses the importance of looking and actively remembering for a scene to be retained in the mind. The action is said to require effort and concentration but with practice becomes habitual and natural and provides a particular sense of detachment, which in turn becomes a source of confidence, pleasure and wonder.

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<sup>301</sup> NMG, 'On Looking at Things', *LL*, pp. 67-71.

<sup>302</sup> Brian Rogers, 'Heidegger on What it Means to Dwell', *Planksip*, < <https://www.planksip.org/heidegger-on-human-dwelling/> > [6 June 2022] (para. 2).

This mixing of immediacy and distance, has already been noted and *Highland River*, with its often-detached commentary on intensively lived experience illustrates it well. The effect is reflected in the aesthetic form of the writing itself where lyrical and immersive prose is used in scenes of high imagination or intense personal experience, particularly of nature, but a more restrained and matter-of-fact tone is employed to discuss educational subjects. Gunn speaks of experiencing pressure from publishers to restrain his inclination to use poetic language and he resented the assertion that its perceived association with Gaelic made it unsuitable for a ‘strong’ novel: a prejudice perhaps echoing the influence of Mathew Arnold-like attitudes and voiced by Mr Elder in *Butcher’s Broom*.<sup>303</sup> Gunn refers to the urge to write in an unselfconscious fashion, without looking far ahead, and of encountering moments of insight and spontaneity as he goes that might be indulged before the need for ‘balance’ comes in. At that point the poetic style shifts into a more concrete register.<sup>304</sup> While he implies that this balance is partially an externally imposed one, it is used to great effect in the texts. An example occurs towards the end of *Highland River* where Kenn is deep in thought as he walks towards the source of his river. His internal narrative is full of poetic description and exhilarating images but this lyricism is punctured by a cleg bite. Within a few lines the tone abruptly shifts from ‘... the whisper of this was far from his mind and soft as the wind’ to ‘Kenn smacked his neck violently and smashed the horsefly’ (*HR*, p. 230-1). The contrasting styles of writing correspond to contrasting aspects of nature and show how his own aesthetic sense is reflected in his personal writing style, both poetic and down-to-earth.

Another indicator of his aesthetic sense is how animism and instinctive behaviour are used in *Highland River* to create a sense of what is fit and pleasing. Gunn’s propensity to look towards evolutionary ideas and continuities reaching back to hunter-gatherer societies results in a heightened awareness of particular aspects of the environment, whether it is the availability of wild food or landscape features that offer safety and security. A large part of his childhood was spent in hunting and gathering and his descriptions illustrate how activity

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<sup>303</sup> Pick, *NMG Selected Letters*, p. 7.

Malcolm Chapman, *The Gaelic Vision in Scottish Culture*, (London: Croom-Helm, 1978)

< <https://ebookcentral.proquest.com/lib/gla/reader.action?docID=4560240#> > [29 August 2023] (pp. 81-2)

*BB*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>304</sup> Pick, *NMG Selected Letters*, p. 223.

and landscape work together to shape ideas of identity, beauty and companionship.<sup>305</sup> The following quote sets out a model of aesthetics that seems to capture some core elements of Gunn's thinking. As with Kropotkin's writings, its evolutionary emphasis chimes with Gunn's own ideas about the deep past and its influence on the present:

Habitat theory postulates that aesthetic pleasure in landscape derives from the observer experiencing an environment favourable to the satisfaction of his biological needs. Prospect-refuge theory postulates that, because the ability to see without being seen is an intermediate step in the satisfaction of many of these needs, the capacity of an environment to ensure the achievement of *this* becomes a more immediate source of aesthetic satisfaction.<sup>306</sup>

It is not suggested here that these theories encompass all aspects of Gunn's landscape aesthetics and they should be seen in the context of both the wider 'Green Tradition' referred to earlier and the cognitive approach noted below. However, they do resonate with aspects of Gunn's writing, particularly in relation to childhood and to hunting activities such as poaching. The links between habitat and ideas of beauty and pleasure are prominent in Kenn's descriptions of the Dunbeath strath and a scene from *Highland River* which arguably offers an example of the prospect-refuge model is where Kenn, Art and Beel hunt down a fish and then acquire various other ingredients for their feast. Their largely illicit activities are conducted from a cave and are a great success. The cave supports their fire and is situated high up, affording a good view. It contains smooth rock faces on which names had been inscribed and to which they add their own. They can see out but are not visible to others, 'they looked from the mouth of their cave upon the broad world with all the sanguine confidence of freebooters and warriors'. Kenn enjoys the feeling, 'these secret glances were to him a source of mysterious pleasure' (*HR*, p. 178). Such scenes do not stand alone and their recurrence in the texts suggest they represent a pattern and a way of critically looking at landscape which draws heavily upon how it represents the source of meeting basic human needs.

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<sup>305</sup> NMG, *AD*, pp. 21-5.

<sup>306</sup> Jay Appleton, *The Experience of Landscape* (London: Wiley, 1975) pp. 68-74. (p. 73)

Gunn's utilitarian aesthetic appreciation of nature contrasts with the eighteenth and nineteenth-century concept of disinterestedness by which the beautiful, the picturesque and the sublime could be objectified and rendered into artistic scenes.<sup>307</sup> He frequently writes depictions that impart a sense of what might be called the beauty of landscapes but rarely in terms that suggest it is being reflected upon as a work of art with formal artistic qualities. Instead, Gunn's position more closely resembles that which Allen Carlson describes as a type of cognitive approach where, in addition to being informed by some scientific knowledge, 'local and regional narratives, folklore and even mythological stories about nature are endorsed'.<sup>308</sup> Gunn's scientific knowledge seems to be primarily of the applied kind that particularly relates to human settlement, so the texts refer more to the historical use of landscape than to its natural history. It is useful to contrast Kenn's aware and nuanced appreciation of ruins encountered in *Highland River* with the sentimental 'rather melancholy' feelings described by the Marchioness of Stafford: brought about by the sight of cleared houses observed during a beautiful drive by a 'lake' (Loch Brora) in 1820.<sup>309</sup> Kenn's response is bound up with associations of continuity of occupation and understanding of heritage. Lady Stafford's remarks suggest a scenic sensibility of the Romantic picturesque but demonstrate an absence of understanding of the biography of the place and, tellingly, her own role within it.

The previous section noted that Gunn and Jamie's texts illustrated changing understandings of what might constitute the natural. Both however, accommodate human presence and intervention as part of their aesthetic appreciation of the natural world: Gunn through the idea of humans being part of Leopold's wider community ecosystem and Jamie through recognition of all-pervasive human management of the natural world. Jamie's essay draws attention to the range of environmental activities that may be described as forms of

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<sup>307</sup> Allen Carlson, *Nature and Landscape: An Introduction to Environmental Aesthetics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2009), pp. 2-5.

<sup>308</sup> Carlson, *NLI*, p. 12.

<sup>309</sup> *HR*, pp. 227-8.

James Hunter, *OSS*, pp. 19-20.

restoration. The introduction of ranched salmon to the Braan and their spectacular but futile attempts to reach the upper waters illustrates that such activity is not necessarily a solely environmental one but represents the coming together of a mix of environmental, commercial and other interests. Like Borgie Wood, discussed in Chapter 2, the Braan salmon are not a form of rewilding but of restoration and, arguably, art.<sup>310</sup>

Gunn's essay 'Gentleman-The Tourist, The New Highland Toast' vigorously argues for the development of Highland industry, presented as the infinitely preferable alternative to the tourism which increasingly formed the basis of Highland incomes. Gunn describes the balanced economy that he would like to see but argues that in its absence even the excesses of industrialisation would be preferable to a future based on tourism with its 'prattling of the scenic beauty of empty glens'.<sup>311</sup> Gunn's phrase highlights the recurring dilemma in the aesthetic appreciation of the Highlands in that it links the concept of beauty with the inhumane consequence of clearance. James's considers aspects of this when he acknowledges that taking aesthetic pleasure in a thing does not necessarily mean moral approval of the actions or person that created it but that equally there are limits in that it is hard to see beauty in the consequences of cruelty. He frames this discussion in relation to the idea of virtue and suggests that the response of an informed and virtuous person to such a scene would be mediated by pathos.<sup>312</sup> Gunn's own response is that of an insider, someone who dwells there and for whom such images have arguably much greater significance than would be the case for those whose relationship is more distant.

In her study of landscape imagery in 2017 and 2018 editions of the *Scots Magazine*, Irmina Wawrzyczek analyses how it operates directly and indirectly to encourage tourism in Scotland and, as noted by Blaikie and discussed in Chapter 1, represent the Highlands as a

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<sup>310</sup> Jonathon Prior and Emily Brady, 'Environmental Aesthetics and Rewilding', *Environmental Values*, 26 (2017), 31–51 The White Horse Press. <doi: 10.3197/096327117X14809634978519> [accessed 7 March 2023] (p. 32.)

<sup>311</sup> McCulloch, *MN*, p. 310.

<sup>312</sup> James, *EP*, pp. 108-10.

wilderness.<sup>313</sup> Wawrzyczek explains how the imagery suggests Scotland to be both an untouched space and a welcoming and comfortable environment.<sup>314</sup> Such artificial and contradictory representations appear to echo the problem noted earlier in differentiating between the natural and the artificial but they can also be seen as a continuance of the influence of the Scottish picturesque, as exemplified by the Hermitage and its surrounds. There is some irony in the fact that the magazine that did so much to showcase Gunn's work and ideas is such a notable medium for the transmission and encouragement of representations which are so problematic.

This chapter has examined some of the ideas and influences argued to have contributed to Gunn's understanding and writing of the natural world. Gunn can seem a contradictory or evasive figure who disparages over-analysis and intellectualism but he is undoubtedly passionately engaged with complex ideas and events. His writing, however, is a rich source for understanding his motivation and other critical work provides a detailed picture of the context and pressures that shaped his literary style. Gunn's sense of the deep past and its role in the present foregrounds evolutionary aspects of human nature and his sense of the importance of mutual aid and community appears to resonate with much of the anarchist writing he encountered. The role of the past is also evident in the prominence of both history and myth in his work and the language of both is employed in its expression. Gunn's environmental attitudes flow from a position of human ecology which, while being distinctly human-centred, understands human life as part of a much wider natural world. This understanding arguably lies behind some of the feelings of anxiety evident in his writing of animals: where his own animal pleasure in hunting and fishing is destabilised by his recognition of suffering and exploitation. This in turn provides an insight into the gendered character of nature as these feelings are questioned as feminine and weak. His aesthetics of nature again reflect the importance of the past as they are bound up with knowledge of landscape's history and role, both material and cultural, in sustaining communities. The

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<sup>313</sup> Irmina Wawrzyczek, 'Scottish Wilderness Rejuvenated: The Regional Identity of Scotland as a Tourist Destination in The Scots Magazine 2017–2018' *Anglica* Special Issue: Scotland Anglica 2020; 29 (3): 31-43 <DOI: 10.7311/0860-5734.29.3.03> [accessed 18 August 2023]

<sup>314</sup> Wawrzyczek, pp. 35-6.

changed, and still changing, meaning of what is natural is evident in how his own writing reads alongside that of what are generally called the new nature writers. Gunn's writing is unrelenting in attesting to the legacy of the historical injustice that he perceived but it is equally insistent on finding delight in the natural world and in human society. The enduring qualities of his writing ensure that both remain in sharp focus and his work continues to urgently argue for redress and a better form of human ecology.

## Conclusion

This work has explored some of the many dimensions of Gunn's landscape writing and considered his novels and essays as forms of literary activism, explicitly highlighting social injustices and offering examples and ideas about how it might be possible to live more satisfying and fulfilling lives. The basis of his vision is his heritage of shared culture and lived experience. Both encourage a distinctive understanding of how human and non-human nature live as part of one ecosystem. Gunn's environmentalism is therefore expressed within a framework of human ecology. It is distinctly human-centred but it also values non-human nature in its own right. This position rests on the idea that human and landscape are extensions of one another. The implications of being responsible for what happens in that ecosystem can be seen in Gunn's representations of animals and how human reactions to them are mediated by the attitudes and circumstances of their given time.

This idea resonates in the context of the twenty-first century with its environmental debates forcing reconsiderations of human ecology. In that light ecocritical readings of both historical and contemporary texts help to unpack examples and lessons which may inform and possibly inspire. Gunn's novels have several strengths in this regard. They address the great issues of their day but consider these through the relatable experience of the local. They are distinctly Scottish and so in a national context they invite readings of the Scottish past and consideration of how forms of historical issues continue to be influential. Prominent among these is the problem of land ownership and management which remains a focus for debates about environmentalism and social justice. The novels also maintain their relevance through their universal concern with the everyday and the fundamentals of life: food, shelter, community and culture.

It has been argued here that much of Gunn's writing of landscape is concerned with synthesis and complementarianism. This is visible in both his handling of the novels' concerns and his own particular writing style. He himself refers to having to blend and find balance in his



writing and this is evident in the novels' particular mix of popular and accessible stories, educational and polemic prose and lyrical description of spiritual and cultural life. His transitional historical situation, illustrated by him being an Anglophone author drawing on close experience of Gaelic culture, gives him a perspective capable of reaching back to the long past while also encompassing the modern world. Gunn's synthesis of myth and history as the means by which to understand and represent Highland life is a powerful medium and neither on their own would arguably have been sufficient for the subject matter of the three novels.

It is a challenge to draw out completely the different dimensions of the natural world in Gunn's work and examine them in solely environmental ways. Such a process would feel forced and imply a duality between material and cultural aspects that is simply not present in the texts, going so far as to deny the fundamental understandings underpinning the novels themselves. This would appear to be because Gunn's perspective completely situates the human within a particular ecology where language and culture are just as much the constituents of objects as their material forms.<sup>315</sup> This encourages an understanding of landscape which is not dominated by purely economic or scientific factors but rather recognises the importance of the experience of living within it. The novels' characters/people would not exist without that landscape and that landscape would not exist without those characters/people, albeit their relationship can never be completely in balance. This, like his blending of the political and the spiritual or the ethical and the biological, is another example of the many syntheses characterising his work.

Ultimately, the novels representations of the natural world rest on what they propose as being the fundamental things of value. By conceiving of nature as part of dwelling the novels foreground the importance and worth of the objects and activities of everyday living. The value of the ordinary is celebrated and not taken for granted. The human and non-human worth of things, such as land, nature and language, is revealed through depictions of their

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<sup>315</sup> Ingold, *PE*, p. 49-50

degradation, destruction and loss. This is often when their meaning is most apparent and when the novels' ability to speak to later times is revealed.

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