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| Grassic Gibbon, Lewis (1901-1935) |
| James Leslie Mitchell |
| Lewis Grassic Gibbon, a pseudonym for James Leslie Mitchell, was a key writer of the early 20th-century Scottish Renaissance, most famous for his trilogy *A Scots Quair*—*Sunset Song* (1932), *Cloud Howe* (1933), and *Grey Granite* (1934). While the majority of critical attention has focused on this trilogy, Mitchell published a wide body of work, ranging from historical fiction to archaeological adventure to science fiction. His work often reflects a leftist, anarcho-socialist politics and a diffusionist worldview, in which modern civilization progressively distances humanity from a primitive, utopian state of being. Mitchell published seventeen books, fifteen between 1931 and 1934, before dying at the age of thirty-four. |
| Lewis Grassic Gibbon was the penname adopted by James Leslie Mitchell, born on 13 February 1901 in Auchterless, Aberdeenshire, Scotland. After working as a journalist in Aberdeen and Glasgow (and being fired for falsifying expenses to fund his left-leaning politics), Mitchell joined the Army in 1919 and was posted to the Middle East, which furthered his interest in archaeology and exploration. Mitchell published his first book, *Hanno: or the Future of Exploration, An Essay in Prophecy* in 1928, followed two years later by his first novel, *Stained Radiance: A Fictionist’s Prelude*. In the next five years, Mitchell published in multiple genres under both his name and his nom de plume. In February 1935, at the age of 34, Mitchell suffered a perforated ulcer and died of peritonitis.  Three thematic and formal currents run through Mitchell’s work. First, for Mitchell, modern culture is an increasingly weakened version of a pre-civilizational utopia. This theory, called diffusionism, ascribes modernity’s barbarity (especially WWI) to growing distance from an edenic past. Second, informed by diffusionism’s pessimistic vision of modernity, Mitchell’s writing blends anarchist and socialist politics suspicious of gradualist and reformist socialist models like fabianism. Lastly, his experiments with language and narrative form matched the success of Hugh Macdiarmid’s revitalisation of the Scots language in the 1920s. Mitchell, however, did not seek to expand Scots vocabulary but foreignised English by moulding it into the rhythms and cadences of spoken Scots, with Scots words added where necessary.  Mitchell synthesizes these impulses most explicitly in the three novels of *A Scots Quair*, which recount political, economic, and cultural changes in northeast Scotland before, during, and immediately following WWI. A Scots Quair draws on the experimentation of Marcel Proust, James Joyce, and Virginia Woolf in its interweaving and interconnecting of past and present, its emphasis on memory, and its modified narrative stream of consciousness. The countryside becomes a character throughout the trilogy, throbbing with life, the intensity of its colours evoking a fauvist landscape. Narrated in a regional dialect, the books follow their female protagonist, Chris Guthrie, as she negotiates the political landscapes of progressively larger communities — from farming village to mill town to port city. The repression of anti-WWI socialists in *Sunset Song*, the betrayals of unionizing mill workers in *Cloud Howe*, and the increasingly violent labour conflicts in the munitions factories of *Grey Granite* all pessimistically chart political conflicts shaping 20th-century Scotland. Mitchell continually distinguishes this cynical vision from the region’s prehistoric inhabitants, represented through the countryside’s mysterious cairn circles. These Neolithic remnants hint at a lost golden age and serve as counterpoint to Chris Guthrie’s violent and unforgiving world.  In addition to *A Scots Quair*, Mitchell’s principal published work is *Scottish Scene* (1934), a collection of creative writing and polemical essays co-authored with Macdiarmid. He was also responsible for initiating Routledge’s ‘Voice of Scotland’ book series, which played an important part in furthering Scottish writing during the interwar period. Mitchell’s two science fiction novels, *Three Go Back* (1932) and *Gay Hunter* (1934), model diffusionism through time travel. Both novels use science fiction to imagine utopian cultures separated from modern civilization. Similarly, his historical novels and archaeological adventures reinforce Mitchell’s modernist pessimism by modeling different moments in a diffusionist historical narrative. In *Spartacus* (1933), Rome serves as the foundations for modern civilization not because of its cultural contributions, but rather because of its exploitation of slave labor, linking the 1st-century BCE slave rebellion to Mitchell’s 20th-century revolutionary impulses. In *The Lost Trumpet* (1932), a search for the biblical instrument that toppled the walls of Jericho symbolizes the civilized individual’s revolutionary capacities. Just as the trumpet destroyed cities, so too can mankind destroy modernity’s corruptions and return to an original state of grace.  [File: GrassicGibbon.jpg]  Figure Lewis Grassic Gibbon  <http://www.grassicgibbon.com/images/ggPhoto.png>  [File: sunsetsong.jpg]  Figure Sunset Song  <http://us.penguingroup.com/static/covers/us/9780141188409H.jpg> List of Works:Novels *Stained Radiance: A Fictionist’s Prelude* (1930)  *The 13th Disciple, Being Portrait and Saga of Malcolm Maudslay in his Adventure though the Dark Corridor* (1931)  *Three Go Back* (1932)  *The Lost Trumpet* (1932)  *Sunset Song* (1932) — Volume 1 of A Scots Quair  *Image and Superscriptions: A Novel* (1933)  *Cloud Howe* (1933) — Volume 2 of A Scots Quair  *Spartacus* (1933)  *Gay Hunter* (1934)  *Grey Granite* (1934) —Volume 3 of A Scots Quair Short Story Collections *The Calends of Cairo* (1931)  *Persian Dawns, Egyptian Nights* (1932) Non-Fiction *Hanno: or the Future of Exploration, An Essay in Prophecy* (1928)  *Niger: The Life of Mungo Park* (1934)  *The Conquest of the Maya* (1934)  *Scottish Scene, or the Intelligent Man’s Guide to Albyn* (1934)  *Nine Against the Unknown: A Record of Geographical Exploration* (1934) Anthologies *The Speak of the Mearns: Stories and Essays* (1982)  *Smeddum: A Lewis Grassic Gibbon Anthology* (2001) |
| Further reading:  (Campbell)  (Malcolm)  (McCulloch)  (Munro)  (The Grassic Gibbon Centre) |