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| **Gunn, Neil M. (1891-1973)** |
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| Neil M. Gunn was one of the writers who responded to Hugh Macdiarmid’s appeal for supporters in his ambitious post-1918 aim to revitalise Scottish literature. Gunn was a Highlander from the village of Dunbeath on the Caithness coast of north-east Scotland and as such was an important recruit for the Lowland MacDiarmid who described his first novel *The Grey Coast* (1926) as ‘something new, and big, in Scottish literature’ (Grieve 1926, 269). |
| Neil M. Gunn was one of the writers who responded to Hugh Macdiarmid’s appeal for supporters in his ambitious post-1918 aim to revitalise Scottish literature. Gunn was a Highlander from the village of Dunbeath on the Caithness coast of north-east Scotland and as such was an important recruit for the Lowland MacDiarmid who described his first novel *The Grey Coast* (1926) as ‘something new, and big, in Scottish literature’ (Grieve 1926, 269). The richness of a childhood in the straths and fishing coast of Caithness left a strong impression on Gunn’s imagination, as did his awareness of the skill and daring of fishermen like his father, and in adulthood his work as an excise officer provided him with new knowledge of the social and economic decline of the area. Childhood and adult experience, together with his reading of Highland history and his awareness of the work of contemporary writers and intellectuals such as Marcel Proust, Henri Bergson, Carl Jung and James Frazer, came together to provide the material for his investigation and re-imagining of the Highlands in his twenty novels published between 1926 and 1954, his many essays, and his autobiography *The Atom of Delight* (1956).  Gunn’s approach as novelist of the Highlands was very different from that of his romantic period predecessor Sir Walter Scott. For Gunn, it was not that Scott’s history was ‘untrue’ but that ‘it no longer enriched or influenced a living national tradition’ (Gunn 1987, 123). In contrast, Gunn believed that a secure future in the modern world could only be achieved by imaginatively rediscovering the broken links between past, present and future. His use of myth and archetypes in his fiction was therefore not an escape into a past ‘Golden Age’, but, as in much literary and visual art of the modernist period, was a way of creatively exploring the crises of the present. He believed also that qualities inherent in his early Pictish ancestors were not lost to the modern world, but could re-surface in later descendants, as can be seen in his trilogy of historical novels, *Sun Circle* (1933), *Butcher’s Broom* (1934) and *The Silver Darlings* (1941). *Highland River* (1937), with its anachronistic operation of narrative time, its relationship with Bergson’s ideas on memory and duration and the exploitation of such ideas in the fiction of Proust and Virginia Woolf, is, formally, the most modernist of Gunn’s novels, its narrative flowing anachronistically and uninterruptedly between the childhood and adult life of its main character, thus creating a living connection between the two states.  Gunn’s Highland fiction not only contributed to the modernisation of the novel in Scotland, but in company with his cultural and political essay-writing of the 1930s encouraged, in a way similar to that of later post-colonialist writers, new public awareness of the reality of Highland history and its present-day situation. List of Works *The Grey Coast* (1926)  *Sun Circle* (1933)  *Butcher’s Broom* (1934)  *Highland River* (1937)  *The Silver Darlings* (1941)  *The Atom of Delight* (1956)  *Landscape and Light* (1987) |
| Further reading:  (Grieve)  (Hart and Pick)  (Price) |