

WORLD WAR I

A SELECTION OF WAR POETRY

by

SCOTTISH POETS FROM THE NORTH-EAST

Violet Jacob (1863 – 1946)
(House of Dun, Montrose)

Mary Symon (1863 – 1938)
(Dufftown, Banffshire)

Charles Murray (1864 – 1941)
(Alford, Aberdeenshire)

Marion Angus (1865 – 1946)
(Arbroath, Angus from age 11)

Dennis Collier (singer-songwriter)
(Stonehaven, Aberdeenshire)

plus

Prose Excerpts from 'Sunset Song'
by Lewis Grassic Gibbon (1901 - 1935)
(born Auchterless, childhood in Arbuthnott, Aberdeenshire)

Celia Craig
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VIOLET JACOB



Violet Jacob (nee Kennedy-Erskine) was sister of the nineteenth Earl of Dun who held the Lands of Dun.

She enjoyed an idyllic childhood, free to be with gentry, servants and ploughmen alike. She wrote copiously, movingly and skilfully about her beloved Angus countryside, the braes, dens, hills and towns, especially Montrose and the people of the area. She tackled numerous themes – love, war, exile, the human condition – and also wrote short stories, a novel and family history.

Two of her most acclaimed poems (later set to music) are “The Wild Geese”, the song of an exile in England – “My feet they traivel England, but I’m deein’ for the north” - and “Tam I’ the Kirk”, a moving love song. She wrote with great effect in both Scots and English.

Married to an Army officer, Lieutenant Arthur Otway Jacob, she travelled to India, Egypt and England and enjoyed being a “nomad” as she termed it. Her son, Arthur Henry (Harry) Jacob was killed, aged 21, at the Battle of the Somme in 1916. Her war poetry touches the heart.

The poem below, moving but unsentimental, is for her son.

TO A.H.J

Past life, past tears, far past the grave,
The tryst is set for me,
Since, for our all, your all you gave.
On the slopes of Picardy.

In Angus, in the autumn nights,
The ice-green light shall lie,
Beyond the trees the Northern Light
Slant on the belts of sky.

But miles on miles from Scottish soil
You sleep past war and scaith,
Your country's freedman, loosed from toil,
In honour and in faith.

For Angus held you in her spell,
Her Grampians, faint and blue,
Her ways, the speech, you knew so well,
Were half the world to you.

Yet rest, my son; our souls are those
Nor time nor death can part,
And lie you proudly, folded close
To France's deathless heart.

THE FIELD BY THE LIRK OF THE HILL ¹

Daytime an' nicht,
Sun, wind an' rain;
The lang, cauld licht
O' the spring months again.
An' the ferm's a' still –
Wha'll sow the seed
I' the field by the lirk o' the hill.

Prood maun ye lie,
Prood did ye gang;
Auld auld am I,
But O! life's lang!
Ghaists i' the air
Whaups cryin' shrill,
An' you nae mair
I' the field by the lirk o' the hill –
Aye, bairn, nae mair, nae mair,
I' the field by the lirk o' the hill!

A mother laments the death of her son, wondering who will now sow the seed and run the farm. Her sorrow is conveyed in simple, moving, repeated words, emphasising the grievous loss of her “bairn” – “An' you nae mair Aye, bairn, nae mair, nae mair”

¹ “Lirk” – hollow or fold in a hill.

JOCK TO THE FIRST ARMY

O Rab an' Dave an' rantin' Jim
The geans were turnin' reid
When Scotland saw yer line grow dim,
Wi' the pipers at its heid;
Noo, i' yon warld we dinna ken,
Like strangers ye maun gang –
*'We've sic a wale o' Angus men
That we canna weary lang.'*

An' little Wat – my brither Wat –
Man, are ye aye the same?
Or is yon sma' white hoose forgot
Doon by the strath at hame?
An div' ye mind foo aft we trod
The Isla's banks before? –
*'My place is wi' the Hosts o' God,
But I mind me o' Strathmore'*

It's deith comes skirlin' through the sky,
Below there's naucht but pain,
We canna see whaur deid men lie
For the drivin' o' the rain;
Ye a' hae passed frae fear and doot,
Ye're far frae airthly ill –
*'We're here. We're hear, my wee recruit,
An' we fecht for Scotland still.'*

An Angus soldier laments the death of his fellow recruits and yearns movingly for home – *“But I mind me o' Strathmore”*

MONTROSE

Gin I should fa',
Lord, by ony chance,
And they howms o' France
Haud me for guid an'a';
And I gang to Thee,
Lord, dinna blame,
But oh! tak' tent, tak' tent o' an Angus lad like me
An' let me hame!

I winna seek to bide
Awa owre lang,
Back to yon rowin' tide
Whaur aye Montrose – my ain –
Sits like a queen,
The Esk ae side, ae side the sea whaur she's set her lane
On the bents between.

I hear the bar
Loupin' in its place
An' see the steeple's face
Dim i' the creepin' haar;
And the toon clocks sang
Will cry through the weit
And the coal-bells ring, on the cairts as they ging
I' the drookit street.

Heaven's hosts are glad,
Heaven's hames are bricht,
And in yon streets o' licht
Walks mony an Angus lad;
But my he'rt's aye back
Whaur my ain toon stands,
And the steeples shade is laid when the tide's at the slack
On the lang sands.

An Angus soldier remembers Montrose, describing it vividly and with longing. Of course Violet Jacob bore this affection for her ain hame toon, Montrose, instantly recognisable from the description.

Glossary

“wale” – choice, plenty of choice
“howm” – haugh, flat ground by a river
“tent” – notice, attention

MARY SYMON



Born in Dufftown, Banffshire, Mary Symon's life echoes that of Violet Jacob in a number of ways.

After her father, a saddler, bought the Pittyvaich estate she lived there and went on to write poetry and articles. Her poetry of the Great War was particularly effective, moving and well-received, conveying through the speakers in these poems her perceptive insight into the innermost thoughts, and feelings and reactions of the soldiers and their families.

A graduate of St Andrews University, she was an accomplished linguist and student of literature. Like Jacob too, she had a deep love for Scotland and for her native countryside, its language, customs and traditions.

Mary Symon did not restrict her poetic output to war poetry but instead covered a variety of themes, some displaying a rich sense of humour and demonstrating in these poems too her insight and empathy.

THE GLEN'S MUSTER ROLL

(The Dominie Loquitur²)

Extracts from this long poem, this roll-call of loss about the lads taught by the Dominie, killed at War, powerfully expresses the horror of the carnage wrought by the First World War - so very many lads who would never return to the Glen, to their dearly-loved homes throughout Scotland. The Dominie is deeply grieved at the loss of these "Loons o' mine" – nearly one hundred all told. He speaks directly to us in the poem, his memories of his Loons at their schoolwork and his sorrow at their loss.

Hing't up aside the chumley-cheek, the aul' glen's Muster Roll
A' names we ken fae hut and ha', fae Penang to the Pole,
An spear na gin I'm prood o't – losh! Coont them line by line,
Near han' a hunner fechtin' men, an' they a' were Loons o' mine.

It's jist like yesterday they sat there raw on raw,
Some tyaavin' wi' the Rule o' Three, some widin' throu 'Mensa'³;
The map o' Asia's shoogly yet faur Dysie's sheemach head
Geed cleeter-clatter a' the time the carritches was said.

... But Dysie's deid and drooned lang syne; the 'Cressy' coffined him.

Dysie, "that sailor Loon o' mine", having been drowned at sea, "in the surf o' Sulva Bay,"⁴ the Dominie reflects on the pull of the sea for the country folk of the Glen.

The muirlan's lang, the muirlan's wide. An' fa says 'ships' or 'sea'?
But the tang o' saut that's in wir bleed has puzzled mair than me.

The Dominie continues with the Roll-Call of his lost "Loons", the poem becoming increasingly moving to the reader as he/she learns of the different fates of his lads.

They're comin' hame in twas and threes; there's Tam fae Singapore –
Yon's his, the string o' buckie-beads abeen the aumry door –
And Dick Macleod, his sanshach sel' ('Guidsakes, a bombardier!)
I see them yet ae summer day come hodgin' but the fleer.

The reader soon learns with a surge of grief that this scene was all in the past, during their school days. These Loons are dead, leaving grieving lass and mother.

But Tam – puir Tam lies cauld an' stiff on some grey Belgian dune
An' the Via Dolorosa' there, faur a wee bit cutty quine
Stan's lookin' doon a teem hill road for a sodger Loon o' mine.

In the final stanza, Symon brings the poem to a moving and intensely sad end.

My loons, my loons! Yon winnock gets the settin' sun the same.
Here's sklates and skailies, ilka desk a' fettled wi' a name.
An' as I sit a vision comes: Ye're troopin' in aince mair,

² "Dominie" – headmaster : "loquitur" - speaks

³ The reference is to writing and Latin studies

⁴ Sulva Bay – refers to the landing on the Aegean coast of Gallipoli

Ye're back fae Aisne an' Marne an' Meuse, Ypres an' Festubert;
Ye're back on weary bleedin' feet – you, you that danced and ran –
For every lauchin' loon I kent I see a hell-scarred man.
Not mine but yours to question now! You lift unhappy eyes –
'Ah, Maister, tell's fat a' this means.' And I, ye thocht sae wise,
Maun answer wi' the bairn words ye said tae me langsyne:
'I dinna ken, I dinna ken. Fa does, oh, Loons o' Mine.

As the wounded and “hell-scarred” men return, the full tragedy is realised – the deaths, the damage, the futility of it all.

Glossary

“sheemach” – mess of hair

“Carritches” - the religious Catechisms, often in question and answer form, to be learnt by heart and recited

“aumry” – cupboard

“sanshach” – wily

“hodgin” – moving awkwardly

“winnock” - window

“sklates” – slates

“skailies” – slate pencil

“futtled” – whittled

THE SOLDIERS' CAIRN

Gie me a hill wi' heather on't,
An' a reid sun drappin' doon.
Or the mists o' the mornin' risin' saft
Wi'the reek owre a wee grey toon.
Gie me a howe by the lang glen road,
For it's there mang whin and fern
(D'ye mind on't, Will? Are ye hearin' Dod?)
That we're biggin' the Soldiers' Cairn.

Far awa' in the Flanders land
Wi fremmit France atween,
But mony a howe o' them baith the day
Has a hap o' the Gordon green;
It's them we kent that's lyin' there,
An' it's nae wi' stane or airm,
But wi' brakin' herts an' mem'ries sair
That we're biggin' the Soldiers' Cairn.

Doon, laich doon the Dullan sings –
An' I ken o' an aul' sauch tree,
Where a wee loon's wahnies hingin' yet
That's dead in Picardy;
An ilka win' fae the Conval's broo
Bends aye the buss o' ern
Where we fuddled a name that noo
I'll read on the Soldiers' Cairn.

Oh! build it fine and build it fair,
Till it leaps to the moorland sky –
More, more than death is symbolled there,
Than tears or trumpets by.
There's the Dream Devine of a starward way
Oor laggard feet would learn –
It's a new earth's corner-stone we'd lay
As we fashion the Soldiers' Cairn.

Lads in your plaidies lyin; still
In lands we'll never see.
This lonely cairn on a hameland hill
Is a' that oor love can dee;
An' fine an' braw we'll mak it a'.
Bit oh, my Bairn, my Bairn,
It's a cradle's croon that'll aye blaw doon
To me fae the Soldiers' Cairn.

The need to create a place - on a "hameland hill" - to mourn individual losses and the community's War dead whose graves are in the battlefield or the sea or honoured on a foreign Memorial is touchingly expressed in this moving poem. Nearly every village in the land has its own post-war War Memorial.

Glossary

"Dullan" – the Dufftown area

"sauch" - willow

"wahnies" – fishing rod, wand

"buss" - bush

"Conval" – hill near Dufftown

"ern" – alder

"futtled" - whittled

A RECRUIT FOR THE GORDONS

I'm aff! The halflin gets my crib
An' keeps the chaumer key;
The morn aul' Mains can dicht his nib,
An scoor the lift for me.

I've listed! Dang the nowt an' neeps!
I'm aff to fecht or fa';
I ken, withoot their weary threeps,
They're mair than needin's a'.

Wi' Huns upon wir thrashel-stane,
An' half the world red wud,
Gweed sax feet ane o' brawn an' bane
Is nae for plooman dud.

An' sae I paumered back and fore,
Practeesin' in my kilt,
An' Sownock fae the bothy door
Kame-sowfed a marital lilt

They leuch till howe an' hill-top rang –
I steppit saft myself;
For aye anaith my bonnet sang
But things I couldna tell –

The bonnet wi' the aul' 'Bydand'
That sat upon my broo –
An' something stirred, grey Mitherland
In my puir hert for you.

As aye and aye the plaidie green
Swung roon my naked knee,
An' mairchin' there anaith the meen,
Lord sake! That wasna me.

Ay me! 'At never shot a craw,
Nor killed a cushy-doo –
But bleed's aye bleed, an' aul' granda
Did things at Waterloo.

An' sae I paumered
The eat-meat sump that kissed the quines
An' took a skyte at Eel;
I was the heir o' brave langsynes,
A sodger, head to heel.

I'm aff the morn ... There's nane'll ken
O' ae broon curly head,
That ees't lie aside my ain
In mains' stoupet bed:

It's laich, laich noo, in Flander's sod,
An' I'm mairchin' wi' the drum,
'Cause doon the lang La Basse road
There's dead lips cryin' 'Come!'

The new Gordons recruit, a farmworker feels the call to enlist realising the country more than needs all of them. He has never killed a creature but prepares to go. Once in Flanders he faces death and sorrow at the Battle of La Basse in Northern France.

Glossary

"halfin" – half-grown youth

"dicht" – wipe

"nowt" – cattle

"threeps" – arguments

"thrashel" – threshold

"wud" – mad

"paumered" – wandered

"kame-sowfed" – played on the comb

"leuch" – laugh

"anaith" - beneath

"Bydand" – abiding, steadfast (Gordon Highlanders' motto)

"sumph" – simpleton

"skyte" – slide

"ees't" - used

"stoupet bed" – bed with posts

"laich" – low lying

MARION ANGUS



(Undated photograph)

Born in Sunderland, England, Marion Angus moved with her family to Arbroath when she was 11 and participated in social and literary group activities there, where her father was a minister. She read widely and, like Jacob and Symon, Angus was committed to the landscape, literature and people of the North-East. After her father's death in 1902, she and her mother and sister moved to Cults, Aberdeen. She undertook War work in the dining hall at the Base at Stobbs (I believe this to be the Army training Base in the Scottish Borders) and expressed admiration and respect for "the simple good sense and kindness" of the ordinary private soldiers.⁵ After having had to sell her house in Cults, Angus spent time in various places, later returning to the North-East before moving back to Arbroath where she died.

Angus wrote few War poems: "Remembrance Day" is perhaps her most well-known of these. She tackled a variety of themes in her poems of place, love and faith, often suggestive of the mood and style of the Scottish ballads with their vividness and air of mystery. In "Barbara", for example, she writes in verse 1:

At mornin's furst cock-craw
I hae won frae the land o' Dreid,
Sair for the sicht o' ye, Barbara –
The glint o' your gowden heid.

⁵ Quoted from "Voices from their Ain Countrie" by Katherine Gordon, ASLS, Glasgow, page 8

REMEMBRANCE DAY

Someone was singing
Up a twisty stair,
A fragment of a song,
One sweet, spring day,
When twelve o'clock was ringing,
Through the sunny square. –

*'There was a lad baith frank and free,
Cam' doon the bonnie banks o' Dee
Wi' tartan plaid and buckled shoon.
An' he'll come nae mair to oor toon. –*

*'He dwells within a far countree,
Where great ones do him courtesie,
They've gien him a golden croon,
An' he'll come nae mair to oor toon.'* –

No one is singing
Up the twisty stair,
Quiet as a sacrament
The November day.

Can't you hear it swinging,
The little ghostly air? -
Hear it sadly stray
Through the misty square,
In and out a doorway,
Up a twisty stair –
*Tartan plaid and buckled shoon,
He'll he come nae mair to oor toon.*

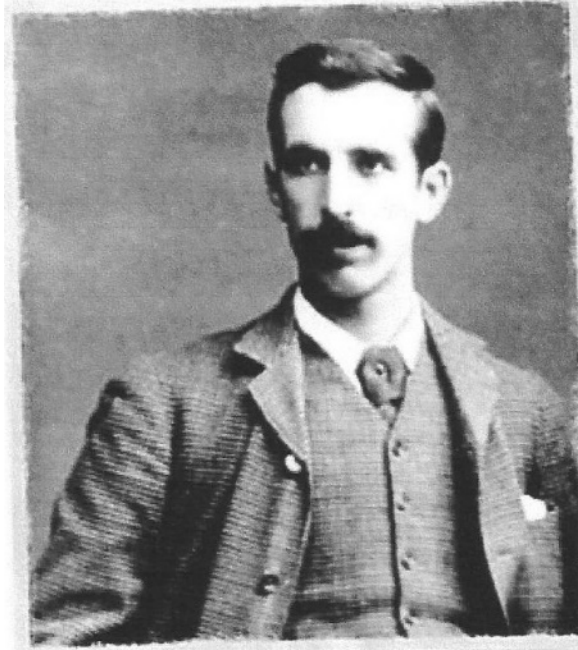
In this poem Marion Angus skilfully links two different time periods when soldiers were killed – in older battles and the then present, post-World War 1 period, as indicated by the poem's title, "Remembrance Day" and the reference to November in verse five.

The two different fonts emphasise this too – standard, plain type for "current" events, italics for time past, verses 2 and 3. She further includes contrast within the "current" verses – verse 1 set in spring, verse 4 in November, verse 5 combining past and present, a present which sadly echoes the past, verse 2 featuring a sunny, spring day, verses 4 and 5 with no singing, only a sad "*ghostly air*", fitting for a sad Remembrance event.

The poem is suggestive, complex and challenging. The repeated refrain "*He'll come nae mair to oor toon*" effectively emphasises the sense of loss of the lads who will never return to their homes, both those lost in ancient battles and those lost in World War 1. The loss in old times is symbolised by the lad from Dee in his tartan plaid (suggestive of the Highland soldier of the past) and buckled shoes who will never again come to their town or to this world from the "*far countree*" which might be the Other World/Elf Land of the ballads but also the lands of France or Belgium: the "*golden croon*" might be his other-world reward or perhaps suggests a type of military medal for war service. The singing on the twisty stair links past and present, the past filtering into the present. The refrain, "*He'll come nae mair*" has strong ballad echoes (e.g. "The Piper o' Dundee").

The poem strongly conveys the sadness of lost lives.

CHARLES MURRAY



Charles Murray, born and educated in Alford, trained as a civil engineer and surveyor and emigrated to South Africa in 1888 where he wrote much of his poetry. He rose to high office, becoming Secretary for Public Works to the South African Government. He made frequent visits to Aberdeenshire before retiring to Banchory in 1924. He died there in 1941.

Like a number of his fellow poets of the North-East, he had an abiding love for the people, customs and language of the North-East, particularly the Vale of Alford, writing with vigour and skill in the vernacular. His "Hamewith" volume of poetry achieved great success. He writes with wit and humour as well as with empathy and feeling, as revealed in his War poems.

GIN I WAS GOD

Gin I was god, sittin' up there abeen,
Weariet nae doot noo a' my darg was deen,
Deaved wi' the harps an' hymns oonendin' ringin',
Tired o' the flockin' angels hairse wi' singin',
To some clood-edge I'd daunder furth an' feth,
Look ower an' watch hoo things were gyaun aneth.
Syne, gin I saw hoo men I'd made mysel'
Had startit in to pooshan, sheet an' fell,
To reive an' rape, an' fairly mak' a hell
O my braw birlin Earth – a hale week's wark –
I'd cast my coat again, rowe up my sark,
An' or they'd time to lench a second ark,
Tak' back my word an' sen' anither spate,
Droon oot the hale hypothec, dicht the sklatae,
Own my mistak', an' since I'd cleared the brod,
Start a' thing ower again, gin I wis God.

Glossary

“pooshan, sheet an' fell” – poison, shoot and kill

“hypothec” – business, concern

DOCKENS AFORE HIS PEERS

(Exemption Tribunal: Excerpts)

In this poem, farmer John Watt (known as Dockens) of the farm of Dockenhill faces a War Assessment Tribunal of his peers, fellow farmers and the like, arguing the case strongly for total exemption of all his farm workers - from his wife and female family members to his eldest son, Francie, to the youngest, Johnnie, all indispensable.

Dockens addresses his peers familiarly, conversationally, cheerily and in friendly fashion, drawing on their shared experiences and farming customs without giving any ground. His arguments are detailed and persuasive. He begins by referring to the weather and previous conversations they have had about the War on market days, responding to their questions – on his identity and if he would like to be seated. He uses their nicknames, showing their normal closeness.

Nae sign o' thow yet. Aye, that's me, John Watt o'Dockenhill;
We've had the war throu' han' afore, at markets ower a gill.
O ay, I'll sit, birze ben a bit. Hae Briggie, pass the snuff;
Ye winna hinner lang wi' me, an' speer a lot o' buff,
For I've to see the saidler yet, an' Watchie, honest stock.

As he details his tasks, he reveals not just how much he has to do on this visit to the Tribunal and to town but also how often he is kindly assisting neighbours and friends. He refers to the difficulties in farming to fellow farmer Mains and how impossible it is to spare anyone to enlist.

It's yfa wedder, Mains, for Mairch, wi' sanw an' frost an' win,
The ploos are roustin' i' the fur, an' a' the wark's ahin
Ye've grun yersel's an' ken the tyauve it is to wirk a ferm,
An' a' the fash we've had wi' fouk gyaun aff afore the term;
We've nane to spare for sojerin', that's nae oor wark ava',
We've rents to pay, an' beasts to feed, an' corn to sell and saw.
Oonless we get the seed in seen, faur will we be fo meal
An' faur will London get the beef they look for aye in Yeel.

He scores a strong hit here with regards to how much the country relies on the work and harvest from farmers to keep going.

He goes on to list a few trades where men might be spared for soldiering – shoemakers, masons, slaters, wrights, quarrymen and tinkers – and pushes this point hard:

Jist shove them in ahin' the pipes, an tell them that it's 'War';
For gin aul' Scotland's at the bit, there's naethin' for't but 'list.
Some mayna like it vera sair, but never heed, insist.

He goes on to make a strong case for individual exemptions for all the folk at Dockenhill, listing the many jobs his wife and daughters do and the massive amount of work done by Francie. The two horsemen are old and married and Johnnie is a mere lad of nineteen whose enlisting would kill his mother. Better to take anyone else but him, wife to Francie: he too does so much about the farm.

Fat? Gar him 'list! Oor laadie 'list? Twould kill his mither, that,
To think o' Johnnie in a trench awa'in fat-ye-ca't;
We would hae sic a miss at hame, gin he was hine awa'
We'd rather let ye clean the toon o' ony ither twa;
Tak' Francie and the mairriet men, But John we canna want.

After listing the many jobs done by John, Dockens comes to his final appeal, featuring the times he had helped Mains out at the bank, saw Larickleys through a difficult issue, assisted Gutteryloan when broken. He wins his case and the verdict is:

'Total exemption' Thank ye, sirs. Fat say ye till a dram?

Essential occupations were exempt from War service during WWI.

Glossary

"birze" – squeeze

"fur" – furrow

"toon" o here the whole farm town of Dockenhill

DENNIS COLLIE

Dennis Collie is a singer-songwriter, living in Stonehaven. He is active with a number of local groups including the Folk Club and the Tolbooth Museum - and formerly wrote with the Grassic Gibbon songwriting group from the area who met in the Lewis Grassic Gibbon Centre in Arbuthnott to compose and share their music.

His poem reflecting on the men of the North-East (the area known as the Mearns) who served in WWI, features the Stonehaven War Memorial on the Black Hill above Stonehaven. It was written in April 2014 while preparing a booklet on Mearns Memorials for the Mearns Connection Festival which had the start of WWI as its theme for that particular year. It forms an interesting contrast with the other poems in this booklet, written during or not long after the War. It touches too on the horrors of that conflict and its effects on those who served.

THE MONUMENT ON THE BLACK HILL

The monument on the Black Hill looks down on Stoney Bay
And West, o'er town and rolling hills to mountains far away.
But to the East: the cold North Sea, to Europe and afar
Where Mearns' lads of years ago went off to fight the war.

'Twas August 1914 when they bravely marched away
Quite happy in the knowledge they'd be home by Christmas day.
"The enemy half-defeated and already on the run"
Another couple of months or so – it surely would be won.

With very little training they shipped to Flanders and to France
Still confident that in battle they'd lead the Huns a merry dance
But there was no glorious battle – 'twas bloody mud and mire
As lambs sent to the slaughter fell to deadly enemy fire.

And Christmas passed, the weeks went by and months turned into years
Of bullets, gas, barbed wire and shrapnel, sickness and disease
Verdun, Mons, Ypres, the Somme – infamous for evermore
Where so many of our brave young lads fell dying in the gore.

Those that survived returned home, but never quite the same
Still in their head the sound and smell of gun and bomb and flame
They never spoke of what they'd seen, and less of what they'd done
Of the days they faced the enemy when they'd rather turn and run.

A hundred years have passed and gone since our young men marched away
So many never did return – with their lives they had to pay
But every year on Poppy day we come here to honour the dead
Remembered still, upon the Hill, where their names can all be read.

LEWIS GRASSIC GIBBON



Excerpts relating to WWI from SUNSET SONG, 1932

Lewis Grassic Gibbon (James Leslie Mitchell) was born in February 1901 at the farm of Hill of Segget, near Auchterless, Aberdeenshire but spent his childhood largely in Arbuthnott in the area of Kincardineshire known as the Mearns at the croft of Bloomfield. He was educated firstly in Arbuthnott where Headmaster Alexander Gray was an inspiration, next at Mackie Academy, Stonehaven which he came to dislike. He followed a career in journalism at first in Aberdeen, then London, later joining the Army and travelling the Middle East and Egypt. He pursued many interests, including ancient civilisations and urban issues such as the Glasgow slums and the Red Clydeside movement. From 1930 to 1934 he wrote eleven novels, two books of short stories, three anthropological books and the 'Intelligent Man's Guide to Albyn', with Hugh MacDiarmid. Gibbon's love-hate relationship with the land is well-known.

His most famous novel and deservedly the Nation's favourite is "Sunset Song", the first volume of 'A Scots Quair' Trilogy which included also "Cloud Howe" and "Grey Granite". The excerpts presented here focus on the effects of World War 1 on soldiers and families, principally on the protagonist, Chris Guthrie, and her husband Ewan Tavendale, and to a lesser extent on their young son and certain other characters from the community he depicted and called Kinraddie - Chae Strachan of Peesie's Knap, Robert Duncan (Lang Rob of the Mill) and Chris's brother, Will, who by a circuitous route had joined the French Foreign Legion.⁶

Chris Guthrie is portrayed by Gibbon with incredible insight into the female mind, heart and soul as she develops from childhood, through adolescence into marriage and widowhood in "Sunset Song". In "Cloud Howe" and "Grey Granite" the depiction continues to trace her development in later life. Her early life is tracked through the symbolism of the life of the land – Ploughing, Drilling, Seed Time and Harvest. Chris is torn between the land which she loves and schooling and learning which she also loves, between her Scottish identity and her English side. She experiences great sorrow at the death by suicide of her mother and the killing by her mother of the baby twins.

⁶ Lewis Grassic Gibbon presents a skilfully detailed picture of the War and its effects on the people and the community and land of Kinraddie, interweaving the stories of Chris, Ewan, Lang Rob, Chae and others but I have chosen here to focus chiefly on Chris and Ewan. For example, with a few light touches on Exemption Board and Conscription Act, he captures the mood of the men of Kinraddie towards the War.

THE WAR

Chris has married Ewan Tavendale and together they work the farm Chris inherited from her father – Blawearie. The early years and the birth of their son are blissful. Slowly the War begins to loom large in Ewan’s consciousness. Chae Strachan has already gone off to war; Lang Rob, a conscientious objector, has been called up before the Exemption Board; Parliament has passed the Conscription Act; Ewan has received his call-up papers but had previously been exempted as a farmer, doing essential work. By 1917 Ewan can resist the pressure to join up no longer and decides to enlist.

He returns to Blawearie on five days leave after training and before drafting to France, darkened and coarsened. He mocks and sneers at Chris, treating her cruelly, forcing himself on her. At first Chris is disbelieving till she turns away from him, closing him out:

*And suddenly then, as always these changes took her, she was calm and secure, putting Ewan from her heart, locking it up that he never could vex her again, she was finished with him, either loving or hating.*⁷

On the day Ewan’s leave is up, there is no reconciliation though Chris, knowing her man well and noting his delaying tactics several times, realises he would have liked a farewell:

She heard Ewan stamp about in the kitchen, he wanted that she should look, go running and fetch him his things. And she smiled again, cold and secure and serene, and heard him come out and bang the door; without raising her head she saw him then. He was in all his gear, the Glengarry on his head, his pack on his shoulder, his kilts a-swing, and he went past her jauntily, but she knew he expected her to stop him, to run after him and throw her arms about him: she expected she saw in his eyes as he went by the fear that she’d pay no heed. [...]

He swung the pack on his shoulders then and went slow down the road to the turnpike bend, she saw that from the kitchen window, knew he believed she would cry to him at the last. And she smiled, cold and sure, that she knew him so, every action and thought, and why he stood there at last, not trying to look back.

He fumbled for matches and lighted his pipe as she watched; and a cloud came over the sun and went on with Ewan. (page 173)

With her heart breaking, Chris stands long staring after her man. Her life has been cruelly disrupted by War – Ewan’s life too. Chris thought she had put Ewan away but finds then “*no salvation at all may endure long*”: she weeps and weeps for “*the shamed, tormented boy with the swagger airs she had let go from Blawearie without a kiss or parting word*”:

Oh, Ewan, Ewan! ... Oh, Ewan I didn’t mean it.

She grieves and prays and then runs out for John Brigson, an older man who has been helping out at the farm in Ewan’s absence, asking him to run after Ewan, not let him go. Sadly he tells her “*It was more than an hour since Ewan had gone down the road, he’d heard long syne the whistle of his train out across the hills*”.

⁷ Lewis Grassie Gibbon, “A Scots Quair: Sunset Song”, Hutchinson and Co, London, 1946, page 172

After a month Chris receives a field postcard from Ewan, simply saying he is well. She tries to think that after the War their madness would be forgotten and they would forget and go on, absorbing themselves in the labour of the fields. She turns as often before to the land and its kindness. Lang Rob of the Mill also comes to her assistance at the harvest time and when the harvest days are over, he tells her that he has decided to go to war after all. They are drawn together as she turns to him for love. He too will pass down that “ill” road that has taken everything she has ever loved.

When the telegram comes with the news of Ewan’s death, Chris’s emotions are powerful and conflicting. At first she wonders what she must do – go to France, to the front line, to a room where she would see Ewan lying dead, killed in action. She summons John Brigson from the fields. He tries to comfort her, his words later proving ironic.

“God, mistress, this is sore news, but he’s died like a man there, your Ewan’s died fine.” (page 177)

Brigson explains that Ewan must already be buried and that all the widows could never be taken to France.⁸ Chris is adamant that he is not dead – *“SHE KNEW THAT IT WAS A LIE!”*

... trying not to hear a cry of agony in a lost French field, not to think that the body that had lain by hers, frank and free and kind and young, was torn and dead and unmoving flesh. ...

He wasn’t dead, he could never have been killed for nothing at all, far away from her over the sea, what matter to him their War and their fighting, their King, their country? Kinraddie was his land, Blawearie his. (page 178)

He has crops to put in and the loch to drain, the snipe calling. Here her lament recalls Jacob’s lines in ‘The Field by the Lirk o the Hill’ – “Wha’ll sow the seed ... Whaup’s cryin’ shrill,? An’ you nae mair.”

The intensity of her grief and sorrow is conveyed powerfully and movingly. It is followed by rage and bitterness at the powers that be until finally Chris has to accept that Ewan is dead.

THE TRAGIC TRUTH

The truth about Ewan’s death is revealed when Chae Strachan comes home on leave. He tells Chris in detail about Ewan’s end. He begins with devastating directness:

Ewan’s dead, don’t vex yourself hoping else. They can’t hurt him more, even this can’t hurt him. Though I swore I’d tell you nothing about it. But I know right well you should know it, Chris. Ewan was shot as a coward and deserter out there in France. (page 179)

Ewan had deserted from the frontline trenches having awakened at last from the dazed state he had been in. He explains why he did it:

⁸ Britain had decided against repatriation of the bodies of the soldiers. Only the rich would be able to afford to bring their dead home. All would be buried in France or Flanders where today so many graves and massive memorials can still be seen.

It was the wind that came with the sun. I minded Blawearie, I seemed to waken up smelling that smell. And I couldn't believe it was me that stood in the trench, it was daft to be there. So I turned and got out of it.

It had come to him in a flash, remembering Chris and the mad things he had done on that leave: “*He had treated her as a devil might, he had tried to hurt her and maul her, trying in the nightmare to waken, to make her waken him up – her face as last he had seen it as she quivered away from his taunts.*”

Ewan knew he had lost her but felt impelled to try at least. He had once promised that he would never fail her, “*so bonny and sweet and a quean in his arms, young and desirous and kind*” He tramped on mile after mile, hoping to tell her that “*Nothing he had said was his saying, it was the foulness dripping from the dream that devoured him*” till he was taken by the military police:

Oh, wearied and wakened at last, Chae, and I haven't cared, they can take me out and shoot me tomorrow. I'll be glad for the rest of it, Chris lost to me through my own coarse daftness. She didn't even come to give me a kiss at good-bye, Chae, we never said good-bye but I mind the bonny head of her down-bent there in the close. She'll never know, my dear quean, and that's best – they tell lies about folk they shoot and she'll just think I died like the rest; you're not to tell her. (page 180)

At this point Ewan begins to speak about home – the smell of dung in the parks, the peewits over the rigs, flying bonny, the Howe happed in mist and Chris sleeping there. Chae noted that Ewan did not look afraid, did not seem to be thinking about the approaching morning of his death. Instead he was thinking about the effects of the War on Kinraddie – with the trees taken down, the land would suffer from lack of shelter. He recalls the night of the lightning when he realised Chris's feelings for him: “*There was nothing between her and me till the night we married – she guarded herself like a queen in a palace.*” He tries in vain to remember what song Chris sang on the night of their marriage and is vexed for a little while till he tells Chae it is time for him to be getting back. After shaking hands, they part with Ewan's final words of good-bye:

Oh man, mind me when next you hear the peewits over Blawearie – look at my lass for me when you see her again, close and close, for that kiss I'll never give her.

Chae had never seen Ewan again, they killed him that morning. (page 181)

Chris reassures Chae: “*Never vex for me or the telling me this, it was best, it was best!*”

On her own upstairs, she kisses and holds close Ewan's clothes. Her benediction is powerfully moving:

Oh, Ewan, Ewan, sleep quiet and sound now, lad, I understand! You did it for me, and I'm proud and proud, for me and Blawearie, my dear, my dear – sleep quiet and brave, for I've understood. (page 181)

THE VISION

At this point, Chris on a sudden impulse takes young Ewan for a jaunt up the hill to the Standing Stones, so often in the past her place of refuge and reflection. It is here

where the final reunion of Chris and Ewan take place in a scene that is intensely and unbearably moving.⁹

Below them Kinraddie; above, the hill; the loch shimmering and sleeping in the autumn sun; young Ewan at her feet; the peewits crying down the Howe.

She gave a long sigh and withdrew her hand from the face of the Standing Stone. The mist of memories fell away and the aching urge came back – for what, for what? Sun and sky and the loneliness of the hills, they had cried her up here – for what?

And then something made her raise her eyes, she stood awful and rigid, fronting him, coming up the path through the broom. Laired with gaur was his uniform, his face was white and the great hole sagged and opened, sagged and opened, red-glazed and black, at every upwards step he took. Up through the broom: she saw the grass wave with no press below his feet, her lad, the light in his eyes that aye she could bring.

The snipe stilled their calling, a cloud came over the sun. He was close to her now and she held out her hands to him blind with tears and bright her eyes, the bright weather in their faces, her voice shaping a question that she heard him answer in the rustle of the loch-side rushes as closer his soundless feet carried him to her lips and hands.

'Oh lassie, I've come home!' he said, and went into the heart that was his forever.
(page 182)

AFTERMATH

A dominant, perhaps *the* dominant theme of the novel is change – on many levels, personal, social, cultural and of course, the changes wrought by the War. Kinraddie is changed beyond measure – physically bare without trees, the crofting community broken up, socially and politically. Mutch of Bridge End has made plenty of “siller” from Irish cattle; his son, Alec swans around in a Ford car. However, the Trustees of the Estate are selling up and Mutch needs to rustle up £900 to buy his own farm. Pooty has become prey to imaginings about Germans and ghosts and tormenting his donkey: he has to be carted off to the madhouse. Long Rob never returned to the Mill but was killed in the last stages of the War, awarded a medal for bravery. Jock Gordon returns blinded from the War and his father turns upper class and political, breaking up the Ploughmen’s Union. Chae Strachan was killed in the first fighting of Armistice Day, an hour before the guns grew quiet, having sore lamented on his last leave the destruction of the trees and the consequences for the land.

A new minister, Robert Colquhoun has arrived and a relationship has started to form between him and Chris Tavendale, leading to the calling of the Banns for their marriage. Colquhoun has been given the task of raising a memorial for Kinraddie men killed in the War but has incurred the criticism of the gentry for his choice of the Standing Stone circle, cleaned up set in place. All are expected to attend the unveiling of the memorial whatever the weather. Chris, her son, Ewan and Robert Colquhoun

⁹ I always remember as a young Principal Teacher of English at Westhill Academy and Scots speaker, reading this extract from “Sunset Song” for a recording organised by the then Advisor for English, Charles King, intended to help pupils understand more actively the lilt and swing of the language of the novel. My voice broke and cracked and the tears started. Charlie was most understanding and reassuring: we moved on to Take 2 which I managed without obvious voice tremors.

are in attendance as well as piper and friend of Ewan, McIvor, along with folk of Kinraddie.

The Service begins and the memorial with the engraving is revealed:

FOR : THE : MEMORY : OF : CHARLES :
STRACHAN : JAMES : LESLIE : ROBERT :
DUNCAN : EWAN : TAVENDALE : WHO
WERE : OF : THIS : LAND : AND : FELL : IN :
THE : GREAT : WAR : IN : FRANCE :
REVELATION : II C : 28 VERSE

The Minister's address, a kind of lament, forms the book's finale. It heralds the end of the era and the sadness of the losses of life and land and language. Yet the verse promises more light – "the morning star". Even as the sun is setting and an ending is nigh, there is hope for the morrow. Notably the Scots language has not been utterly lost as here predicted. Perhaps too we can still say with Chris not only that nothing endures but also her other mantra that nothing endures but the land.

FOR I WILL GIVE YOU THE MORNING STAR

In the sunset of an age and an epoch we may write that for epitaph of the men who were of it. They went quiet and brave from the lands they loved, though seldom of that love might they speak, it was not in them to tell in words of the earth that moved and lived and abided, their life and enduring love. And who knows at the last what memories of it were with them, the springs and winters of this land and all the sound and scents of it that had once been theirs, deep and a passion of their blood and spirit, those four who died in France? With them we may say there dies a thing older than themselves, these were the Last of the Peasants, the last of the Old Scots folk. A new generation comes up that will know them not, except as a memory in a song, they passed with the things that seemed good to them with loves and desires that grow dim and alien in the days to be. It was the old Scotland that perished then, and we may believe that never again will the old speech and the old songs, the old curses and the old benedictions, rise but with alien effort to our lips.

The last of the peasants those four that you knew, took that with them to the darkness and the quietness of the places where they sleep. And the land changes, their parks and their steadings are a desolation where the sheep are pastured, we are told that great machines come soon to till the land and the great herds come to feed on it, the crofter has gone, the man with the house and the steading of his own and the land closer to his heart than the flesh of his body. Nothing, it has been said is true but change, nothing abides, and here in Kinraddie where we watch the building of those little prides and those little fortunes on the ruins of the little farms we must give heed that these also do not abide, that a new spirit shall come to the land with the greater herd and the great machines. For greed of place and possessions and great estate those four had little heed, the kindness of friends and the warmth of toil and the peace of rest – they asked no more from God or man, and no less would they endure.

So, lest we shame them, let us believe that the new oppressions and foolish greeds are no more than mists that pass. They died for a world that is past, these men, but they

did not die for this that we seem to inherit. Beyond it and us there shines a greater hope and a newer world, undreamt when these four died. But need we doubt which side the battle they would range themselves did they live today, need we doubt the answer they cry to us even now, the four of them, from the places of the sunset?
(pages 192 – 193)

The piping of the *Flowers of the Forest* by *McIvor* follows, tearing at their hearts. Chris sheds no tears. It is dark but the Minister stays with Chris:

They'd the last of the light with them up there, and maybe they didn't need it or heed it, you can do without the day if you've a lamp quiet-lighted and kind in your heart.
(pages 192 – 193)

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