

Ian Macpherson's Writing of the Disaster

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The works of the Highland novelist, journalist, and farmer Ian Macpherson (1905-1944) are most often valued for their anticipation of more famous contemporary Scottish texts. His first novel, *Shepherds' Calendar* (1931), has frequently been seen to prefigure Lewis Grassie Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, published a year later. Similarly, *Land of Our Fathers* (1933) and *Wild Harbour* (1936) are often compared to the work of Neil Gunn (*Butcher's Broom* and *Bloodhunt*, respectively). Indeed, many of Macpherson's modern defenders labour primarily to situate Macpherson within the context of better-known contemporary Scottish novelists, and only then address the merits of his work itself.¹ This work of comparative reclamation is undoubtedly necessary: while Kurt Wittig and J.M. Reid briefly mention Macpherson in their mid-century histories of Scottish literature, recent influential surveys, including those by Maurice Lindsay, Francis Russell Hart, and Cairns Craig, bypass him entirely.² Macpherson's novels deserve greater recognition both for their place in Scottish literary history and for the unorthodox and surprising ways they depict the entwined failures of writing and community. More forcefully than other contemporary chroniclers of the effect of modern industrialisation on rural communities, Macpherson presents a vision of the world that defines community precisely by its unsustainability.

Macpherson's work can be read as part of a modernist tradition that, in the words of Robert Baker, opposes a 'critical narrative of decline' to 'a hollow narrative of progress'.³ More particularly his novels, especially *Wild*

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Harbour, are part of an apocalyptic tradition. Frank Kermode has connected modernist literature, specifically the novels of D.H. Lawrence, to a larger tradition of 'the fiction of apocalypse', and argues that this work 'helped to shape the disastrous history of our time'.⁴ Yet the ideas of 'apocalypse' and 'disaster', as Kermode points out, are both pervasive and ill-defined in twentieth-century literature. Macpherson's contribution to this tradition lies in depicting the failure of community as the representative disaster of the twentieth century. While his fiction is concerned explicitly with the decline of Aberdeenshire farming communities, both during the Clearances and in the twentieth century, he also presents the decline of community as the central disaster of the present and as a commonplace throughout human experience.

Macpherson's narratives of vanishing communities can be productively compared to the reading of disaster proposed by Maurice Blanchot. For Blanchot, as Kevin Hart articulates, the disaster is a way to rethink ethics not in terms of the individual's relation to other individuals, but in terms of community.⁵ This conceptualisation of the disaster focuses on an anonymous sensibility that presents, in Hart's words, 'the unrepresentable *as* unrepresentable'.⁶ In Blanchot's model, the disaster cannot be represented as a single moment or event after which everything changes, nor is it linked to individual experience. Instead, the disaster as such is a way to conceive of an immanent and unspecified threat that is always already at work. The disaster lies outside of time: fiction can neither forecast its coming nor respond to its appearance, but must present the disaster as deeply connected with the act of writing itself. Rather than presenting the apocalypse or disaster as a particular event that the individual must confront, Blanchot shows that the disaster is deeply connected to broad conceptions of community and writing.

In Macpherson's most ambitious novel, *Wild Harbour*, and to a lesser extent in *Shepherds' Calendar*, he presents a similar notion of the disaster as a central and inescapable

aspect of contemporary life. While many of his English and Scottish contemporaries ground their disaster in technological and industrial progress, Macpherson shows its relevance to everyday experience, using tropes of parochial or rural fiction to explain the relationship between nature, culture, and disaster. Gibbon's *Sunset Song* and Nan Shepherd's *The Weatherhouse* present visions of traditional Scottish communities that are irrevocably transformed by The Great War. Macpherson, however, writes of a community that has had no golden age and is under continual threat. The disaster does not arrive at a particular moment in time, nor does it arise from particular causes, but has instead always been present. Macpherson's novels foreground the difficulties of communal life, and question the possibility of writing such a life at all. Macpherson's work depicts a Scotland – indeed, a world – where community, family, religion, and nature are always already corrupt and for which documentation is impossible. His best work has little of the sentimentality of Gunn's early historical fiction, to which it is often compared, but instead shows a world free from any respite in an idyllic past.

Macpherson approaches the disaster in three ways: his novels centre on death, the form of disaster found in nature; on violence, the form of disaster found in community; and on disaster itself, outside of time and causality. The latter conception of disaster occupies much of *Wild Harbour*, but the emphasis on death and violence in his early works also indicates a prevailing notion of a rural life that is not altered by historical events, but has always been defined in relation to its end. Reading Macpherson's writing adjacently to Blanchot's writings on the disaster and Lawrence's novels reveals that Macpherson deserves to be considered not only in the context of 1930s Scottish literature, but also as an important contributor to the broader field of twentieth-century literature of the disaster.

A. *Shepherds' Calendar* and Other Early Works

In his defence of Macpherson as a 'neglected pastoral

novelist', Graham Cuthbert argues that he combines 'the narrow, literal passion [for the land] natural to the land-hungry peasant, and the broader passion which has its roots in historical knowledge and aesthetic sense'.⁷ Robert Crawford similarly finds in Macpherson's work an 'Edenic sense of getting back to earthy basics' and 'a sense of seasonal changes and rhythms'.⁸ Yet even as Macpherson evokes pastoral models, his primary interest is in the way that a passion for the land, whether it arises from economic necessity or aesthetic sensibility, can obscure the omnipresent death and disaster already at work in both nature and community. Structured according to the agricultural year, *Shepherds' Calendar* is startling in its omnipresent focus on death and decay. The section devoted to Winter occupies half of the novel, and throughout there is little hope of regeneration or happiness. While Gibbon uses agricultural metaphors in *Sunset Song* to suggest the continued promise of a spiritual regeneration based in the constancy of the land itself, Macpherson suggests that a dependency on traditional or agricultural forms of knowledge is ultimately destructive.

Sorrow and death are commonplace in traditional forms of the pastoral, where the hardships of winter form a necessary contrast to the rejuvenation of spring and summer. As Raymond Williams argues: 'Within the beautiful development of the pastoral songs this sense of a simple community, living on narrow margins and experiencing the delight of summer and fertility the more intensely because they know winter and barrenness and accident, is intensely present'.⁹ The cyclical nature of the pastoral allows for constant death and rebirth. *Shepherds' Calendar* differs from more traditional pastorals, however, in Macpherson's concentration on themes of barrenness and accident to the exclusion of all else. The novel can be read as an updating of the story of Colin Cloute in Edmund Spenser's *Shepherd's Calendar*, who cries: 'Such rage as winters reigneth in my heart, / My life-bloud friesing with unkindly cold' (i. 25-26).¹⁰ Yet for Spenser human misery – even when multiplied across many individuals and seasons – is

always voiced by the individual. For Macpherson, death and disaster are not only seasonal occurrences that will give way to the delights of summer, as in the pastorals of Theocritus or Virgil, nor are they limited to young love and old age, as in Spenser. Instead, the disaster is present at the very heart of the land and the community; even if unacknowledged, it is inescapable.

Macpherson's shift from a depiction of winter as a symbol of transitory hardship in an individual life to a universal and pervasive complaint can be seen most clearly when his novel is placed in opposition to a more famous Scottish work of the same title – albeit with an important shift in the possessive apostrophe, perhaps indicating a universalising tendency on Macpherson's part – James Hogg's *The Shepherd's Calendar*, a compilation of rural tales. While Hogg recounts 'most romantic and unnatural' stories that are 'founded on a literal fact',¹¹ Macpherson portrays a world that has no recourse to romanticism. The lives of the people in Macpherson's works are uniformly dreadful: if Hogg uses the form of a 'Shepherd's Calendar' to present the stories in which rural people might seek diversion, Macpherson uses the form to illustrate the very impossibility of escape from present hardship. The novel is rigorously unsentimental, and reveals the illusory nature of all that tradition has held to be good. Yet the pessimism of Macpherson's novel is not unmitigated. The novel is not only a response to growing industrialisation or the mechanisation of agriculture, but also to earlier Scottish fiction. *Shepherds' Calendar* is in many ways a rebuttal to what Cairns Craig calls the 'sickness' of kailyard literature – a name given to the romantic and parochial novels of Ian Maclaren and Samuel Crockett, among others, that dominated late nineteenth-century Scottish fiction – with 'its inherent sentimentality and its flight from the realities of industrial Scotland'.¹² Yet Macpherson goes much farther than George Douglas Brown's *The House with the Green Shutters* – a novel *Shepherds' Calendar* closely echoes, and that Craig and other critics consider a definitive rebuttal of

the idealism of late nineteenth-century Scottish fiction – in his condemnation of a pastoral, romantic, or idyllic view of Scottish life.

Brown's novel can be considered a retort to the kail-yard's depiction of healthy, unified communities; he highlights the way in which 'in a small place like Barbie every man knows everything to his neighbour's detriment'.¹³ The novel's protagonist, John Gourlay, and his family are finally destroyed by the malignant gossip of their neighbours. Yet even as the novel ends in tragedy, it still allows for an untarnished view of nature. Shortly before the family's death, John Gourlay, jr, sees a transfigured world: 'It was a mellow evening, one of those evenings when Barbie, the mean and dull, is transfigured to a gem-like purity, and catches a radiance'.¹⁴ The natural world is wholly other, and is untouched by human weakness and cruelty. Writing thirty years later of a similar town, Macpherson critiques not only interpersonal relations, but also any lingering notions of a pleasant or inviting natural environment. It is not only that modern industrialisation has made recourse to the land impossible, but that the land has always been a place of danger and death. From *Shepherds' Calendar's* first page, the landscape is imbued with death and violence:

On the ridges of the valley fantastic rocks bear witness to the forces which once tormented the earth. Yet the rocks witness the decay of cosmic might no less than its former haphazard frenzies. It is a meagre and unsatisfactory fantasy they have; smooth; untrue as the glamour with which men invest old wars. Slow weathers have caressed the havoc; mists have slobbered over the broken skeleton of the world. The bones are hid with miraged flesh.¹⁵

A view of nature as in any way benevolent is revealed to be a romantic falsehood: for Macpherson, any aspects of the

human or natural world that we find beautiful or praiseworthy are in fact only the concealing of a primordial violence. The world is made through violence and death, and is inherently hostile.

While *Shepherds' Calendar* can be productively compared to early twentieth-century Scottish fiction, it bears an even more striking resemblance to Lawrence's *Sons and Lovers*, from which it takes much of its narrative structure. Macpherson echoes both what Williams identifies as Lawrence's account of ways in which industrialisation prevents the sustaining of community¹⁶ and what F.R. Leavis claims is *Sons and Lovers's* 'treatment of the personal problem'.¹⁷ Both *Shepherds' Calendar* and *Sons and Lovers* feature a weak, self-absorbed protagonist with a violent opposition to his father and an overwhelming reliance on his mother. In both narratives adolescent romance is tinged with guilt and hatred, and the local community is both corrupted and impossible to leave. Yet while Paul Morel in *Sons and Lovers*, like John Grant in Macpherson's novel, sees the world as filled with 'too much horror and misery',¹⁸ the difficulties of social life in Lawrence are somewhat abated through recourse to the natural world. For Lawrence's characters – in this case, Mrs. Morel – a sunset can provide 'one of those still moments when the small frets vanish, and the beauty of things stands out'.¹⁹ As Marshall Berman notes, Lawrence's novels display a constant opposition between a 'nihilistic rage and despair' and 'erotic joy, natural beauty and human tenderness'.²⁰ Even at the novel's end, when Paul Morel has lost all whom he loved and night reveals its 'vastness and terror', the possibility of hope remains: 'So much, and himself, infinitesimal, at the core a nothingness, and yet not nothing'.²¹ In Lawrence's early vision there is always a residual hope that the individual will not be overcome by hardship and doubt, but that love and beauty will triumph.

Macpherson presents a similar world to that of Lawrence, but with the notable exclusion of that lingering hope. In a similar night-time tableau in *Shepherds' Calendar*:

Night brought no comfort. Fire itself seemed clammy. There were mists in the minds of men. All the ponderous machinery of decay had been set in motion, and the world listened apathetically to its slow dissolution.²²

In this passage, early in his first novel, Macpherson reveals what is perhaps the central thesis of his work: nature and 'the minds of men' are closely linked in irrevocable decay, from which respite is impossible. Here there is none of what Williams, writing on both Lawrence and Gibbon, calls: 'The song of the land, the song of rural labour, the song of delight in the many forms of life with which we all share our physical world'.²³ For Macpherson, nature and industry are forever mixed in the 'ponderous machinery of decay', and both serve only to destroy human communities and individual will.

John Grant, whose choice between farming and university is at the centre of *Shepherds' Calendar*, sees violence everywhere represented in mechanical terms. The mill where he works is 'like the belt of a machine-gun, feeding sheaf ammunition to the insatiable drum'.²⁴ For John, as for no other character in the novel, modern and technological forms of violence are omnipresent and inescapable, even in the most idyllic or pastoral setting. As he matures, he develops a view of the world in which sorrow and loss are predominant. The happiness of a given moment is imbued with the 'memory of unhappiness', while even his idylls contain the 'premonition of approaching disease'.²⁵ John Grant recognises the approach of modern technology and violence in a world that stalwartly resists them and, like John Gourlay in *The House with the Green Shutters*, he is made miserable by the recognition that he is ill suited for a life that he cannot abandon. Grant refuses his mother's plans for his university education, and instead wilfully embraces death and misery:

John stood in the centre of the moor and stared out over the grey waste. He felt that this was a land akin to his life. His life was desolate like this place. [...] He lived for a moment exulting in the barrenness of his life which made him kin to this barren land. There was no sorrow like his vast out-flung sorrow. The wind that went by him was the voice of his sorrow, days and nights were his sacrifices to sorrow. His life was consecrate to sorrow, sorrow that was landless, timeless. For ever and ever he was consecrate to desolation.²⁶

The stilted and repetitive quality of the language in this passage reinforces Macpherson's thesis: the only escape from the disaster already present in everyday life is the recognition that there is no escape.

Macpherson's focus on a central and definitive individual 'sorrow' existing outside of time suggests the timeless nature of the disaster made explicit by Blanchot. Blanchot defines disaster as an 'unknown thought' that disrupts solitude and still leaves us alone; it is the repetition of extreme singularity.²⁷ In *Shepherds' Calendar* Grant understands his relation to the land through his discovery of sorrow, but that discovery also isolates him and deprives him of all possible human relation. He is part of a community predicated only in sorrow and barrenness, and sees the land not as a symbol of endurance, like Chris Guthrie in Gibbon's *Sunset Song*, but only as desolation. Like Brown before him, Macpherson uses the form of the Scottish pastoral novel to demonstrate its own inadequacies. More forcefully than Brown, however, he shows that once a romantic perspective has been removed, all that remains is to embrace the decay underneath. Once Grant recognises that there is no unified community in which he could live, he can only accept isolation and decay for what they are. He is unable to leave his home, but must stay where he

is, hating the place and recognising the disaster in himself.

Macpherson employs a more moderate tone in his two historical novels, *Land of Our Fathers* and *Pride in the Valley*. *Land of Our Fathers* is a straightforward account of the clearances in which the disaster is present only as external intrusion. As in many of his works, the Gaelic-speaking Highlanders represent an idyllic form of the past, while Lowland Scots exemplify violence and disaster. The novel begins with an account of invasion: 'The colonists settled upon their farms under the familiar smoke of burning homes, and the distress of the evicted natives could be heard above the bleating of imported flocks'.²⁸ Donald Graeme, the protagonist, is the child of a mixed marriage between Highland and Lowland parents, and the novel is concerned with his gradual acceptance of a heritage predicated on the destruction of his mother's family. Unlike John Grant, Donald Graeme is not imprisoned by the discovery of a continual violence in his life, but liberated by it. Graeme overcomes his internal divisions through an exploration of the natural world. The threat in *Land of Our Fathers* comes not from nature, but from a pre-occupation with history. In the wilderness he finds some measure of peace; there, like his mother Margaret, he attempts to consign historical violence to 'the past'.

The novel ultimately hinges on Margaret's displacement of historical events to make room for an acceptance of the world as it is. Once she has come to terms with her own fate, the world can function smoothly:

She had made up her mind to the death of the old order. Now that its destruction was complete she mourned it; the glory of her country was departed; it was in the past, made more lovely by its death. She had seen it die; while the last breath of life lingered she felt all its pangs; the agony was for ever ended, and her husband, who shared the guilt of that slow murder, was no longer busy

about its accomplishment. The past was fine enough in her eyes to justify its death; the past was hers, nothing could alter it to destroy it; she felt towards him like one who sees the dear altars broken and temples cast down, and, knowing it is the substance that is destroyed, but the shadow remains of which all substance is shadow, pities the destroyers for their poor frenzy.²⁹

As in the excerpt from *Shepherds' Calendar* above, Macpherson's repetition of key phrases reveals Margaret's acceptance of the disaster, although here that acceptance is framed far more positively than in the previous novel. The shift in the fourth sentence from 'the past' to 'him' (her husband) to, apparently, the Reformation, demonstrates that for Margaret, contentment lies in treating historical events indiscriminately: both her own history and larger cultural shifts can be understood only in relation to death. It is only when singular historical events are consigned to an undifferentiated past, but also internalised, that the self can develop.

This sentiment is repeated in *Pride in the Valley*, set fifty years later, where Ewen Cattanach reflects that:

The old days were done – he had seen them end – he carried them in his heart and they were immortal while he lived [...]. Many things that had been sad when they came to pass, some things that had been bitter for years, or trivial, were coloured in the sunset. There was no bitterness left in the last manifestation of the ways which he had loved, and now remembered together.³⁰

This final clause contains the key to these two novels: it is only when past events are remembered together, as a circumscribed whole, that they lose their power to injure. For Ewen and Margaret, both representatives of a depleted

Highland culture, the way to move into the future is to reject the specificities of the past.

In both the strongly negative *Shepherds' Calendar* and the more optimistic *Land of Our Fathers* and *Pride in the Valley*, the continuance of the self is elevated above the difficulties of the present. The protagonists recognise the disaster around them, but rarely seek to change it. Macpherson treats his protagonists' acceptance of sorrow and violence with a degree of scepticism: such acceptance may be necessary, but it is rarely admirable. In each of his first three novels, the protagonists are content with a life in which history is forgotten and violence and death are always near, not because it is good but because it is unavoidable. The choice to forget history is like the choice to ignore death mentioned at the beginning of *Shepherds' Calendar*: it is foolish and misguided, but is perhaps the only way to outlast the disaster.

Macpherson makes his critical perspective explicit in his ambivalent presentation of writing itself. Writing for Macpherson is closely linked to avoidance: it removes both history and responsibility from the individual life. In this his perspective is similar to Blanchot, for whom 'To write is to surrender to the fascination of time's absence'.³¹ For Macpherson writing brings about a separation from the world of historical events, and marks a loss of personal initiative. Writing is a form of escape that ultimately proves illusory. For both Macpherson and Blanchot, writing marks 'the decay of the will'³² and the loss of power. More particularly, in Macpherson's novels writing emerges as a gendered construct: only men are able to write, and only women desire writing. Power, in Macpherson's world, is necessarily masculine, and writing detracts from that power. When, in *Land of Our Fathers*, Donald Graeme attempts to write his father an explanatory letter, he claims 'I can't write another word', to which his mentor Ranald Maclaren responds, 'Indeed, and I don't blame you. It's not the occupation for a man'.³³ Writing marks a defeat: it signifies the loss of land and history, and the failures of received notions of masculinity.

The man who writes is unable to face the world completely. If peace can only come through looking at the past as a unified whole, writing is dangerous because it relies on specificity.

B. *Wild Harbour*

The complicated relationship between writing and the disaster is most explicitly presented in Macpherson's final published novel, *Wild Harbour*, on which his reputation is justly sustained. Although constructed as a series of journal entries, the journal's writer, originally a novelist, is immediately suspicious of the act of writing. Hugh is angered by his wife's request that he write in order to 'keep [his] mind busy':

“Write!” I exclaimed. “Good God, is that what you'd like me to do? Didn't you hear the guns last night, don't you know the whole world's in a flame? What'll I write, now; fairy-tales maybe for cities drowned in gas, or shall I scribe moralities on the rock with a nail for future generations to wonder at my wisdom?”³⁴

Writing represents the inadequacy of a culture to meet its own disaster: the – largely undefined – apocalypse at hand finally cannot be written. As in Blanchot, writing is both impossible and necessary: Hugh rejects writing at the same time that he constructs a first-person written narrative. As Blanchot writes: ‘Neither reading nor writing, nor speaking – and yet it is by those paths that we [... enter] the space of distress’.³⁵ Writing cannot account for the disaster, but it remains the only possible response.

Much has been made of *Wild Harbour*'s prescient framing of particular political disaster: published in 1936, the novel is set in a war-torn Britain of 1944. Scotland has been invaded and its communities destroyed; in order to survive, Hugh and Terry, a couple modelled closely on

Macpherson and his wife Elizabeth, escape to a cave in the Highlands where they make their way by foraging. Yet as much as the novel is concerned with a contemporary political situation, it is also closely allied with the long tradition of Highland adventure stories most fully realised in the novels of Robert Louis Stevenson and John Buchan. *Wild Harbour* repeatedly echoes David Balfour's perception, in Stevenson's *Kidnapped*, of 'no particular nightmare, only of a black, abiding horror – a horror of the place I was in'.³⁶ The Highland world presents both a space for adventure and a general, inescapable threat.

As much as it works within familiar traditions, however, the novel also raises the question of how the adventure story itself relates to the concerns of everyday life. The novel's central tension is the divide between the way one learns to live from the land and the danger of learning from books:

"They say folk in caves and wildernesses and desert islands escape all the trivialities of life."

"I've heard so," I agreed.

"What fools people are!" she [Terry] cried.

"Folk in caves and desert islands must be far more commonplace and matter of fact than any one ever needs to be in a town. In a town you run to the shop at the corner – oh, my God, what is happening in towns?" she burst out.

"People take their notions of strange ways of life from books," I suggested in an effort to save myself as well as her from thinking of the horror that would not be gainsaid.³⁷

Books and writing represent the life that came before the disaster. The divides between country and town, between peace and war, are learned through reading. Hugh discovers over the course of the novel that the true disaster, here

materialised in the form of invasion but also completely unknown and unknowable, cannot be written, nor can any reading prepare the individual to confront the disaster.

As in the above passage where Terry suggests writing as a diversion, writing is defined throughout the novel as a process of both preparation for and avoidance of disaster. Before Hugh and Terry have left their community and home, they make distinct written plans:

we began to make our plans, to write down lists of what we would require, if we were to live in hiding, in the hills, out of reach of our enemies. The occupation of planning our life, away from the hazards and ills of common life, freed us to a certain extent from our preoccupation with these ills. While we were making lists of food and tools and clothing the threat of war receded a little, so that when our lists were completed, and we were in imagination already escaped, the immediate necessity for escape was no longer there to urge us to action.³⁸

Writing is both the necessary response to the threat of disaster and also a way of reducing that threat. It is in this way that writing marks the strange, atemporal quality of the disaster. As Blanchot argues, “‘Already’ or ‘always already’” marks the disaster, which is outside history, but historically so: before undergoing it, we [...] will undergo it’.³⁹ Hugh and Terry’s writing lets them forget the disaster, even as it is necessitated by that disaster; writing simultaneously reveals and conceals the disaster, and allows the writer to plan for a future that is already at hand.

Like the threat of disaster in more recent Scottish novels ranging from George Mackay Brown’s *Greenvoe* to Alasdair Gray’s *Lanark*, the disaster in *Wild Harbour* is both highly specific and unknowably general. Direct evidence of the presumed threat only appears when Hugh and Terry

visit their former home and find that the 'walls are broken and the garden spoiled'.⁴⁰ Unlike the protagonists of Macpherson's earlier novels, Hugh cannot consign past violence to memory and then forgetfulness. Instead,

Memory has no surcease. Each battered trinket on the filthy floor confronts me. This longest day will never end.⁴¹

It remains unknown who has destroyed their house and why: its destruction is not locatable in time. As Hugh and Terry begin to recognise the disaster around them, they lose their grasp of time: 'The future was so uncertain and overclouded that a year ahead seemed like old age to youth, a fabulous distance away'.⁴² The disaster is always coming, but can never come at a precise moment, because the future is undefined. Having abandoned their community because of the threat of disaster, Hugh and Terry are locked into a futureless, limitless world. The disaster is omnipresent because it is both interior and exterior: it is not purely localisable in time or space, but is a threat that comes from the mind as much as from external forces. As Hugh writes, 'even when we seemed to forget the reason for our escape, those guns we heard spoke to our secret minds, and the thought of war disturbed our inmost thoughts'.⁴³ The disaster is inescapable precisely because it is always internally realised.

When a tangible disaster does arrive, in the form of contact with the invaders, it is already displaced and can neither fulfil nor abolish its own threat. The immanent disaster has rendered Hugh unable to see either himself or the invaders as individuals:

I see pigmy figures toiling over hills, running, falling, one dying; they are not human; not I but a marionette effigy of myself am amongst them. [...] I should feel horror, and I feel none.⁴⁴

Yet even as the general threat of disaster dehumanises, the possibility of being human – and individual – still emerges in moments of violence. Shortly after Hugh and Terry see the invaders, Hugh shoots one while on a hunt, and in that moment recognizes both the other and himself as distinct individuals: ‘I was conscious of nothing in the world but this man, facing me, with his rifle, like my own, pointed at me, and my breathful lungs. I saw him with more clarity than anything else has ever shown’.⁴⁵ The other is made distinct in the moment of death: the death of another individual is both a facet of the disaster and its rebuttal, for it makes the disaster appear as something that can be confronted directly. As Blanchot writes in a discussion of Camus, when one individual encounters another in the time of disaster, the only way to survive is to make the other ‘undergo the extreme questioning whose horizon is death’.⁴⁶ The immediate death of another serves as an answer to absence. Indeed, the moment when Hugh shoots the invader briefly reconfigures the novel into an idealised pastoral scene that none of Macpherson’s previous novels allow:

The past had no shape or form until now. [...] The jewelled summer shows itself again; I remember how we bathed and played at gathering berries in the bright hot weeks when every creature was young. Summer’s a lovely dream; hardships and fret remove themselves from knowledge. [...] What we suffered seems now an apprenticeship merely. I remember our wasted garden, without grief, and the days of our flight, without dismay. I do not hate the men who hunted me nor suffer horror when I recall the man I killed. *He* came to the place of his death where I killed him, I but the instrument of that power which carries men out of fear and rage to pity.⁴⁷

The other's death allows a resurgence of time and emotion. Hugh is now able to see 'the completed past' as well as the present and the future. Not only, as in Blanchot, must one 'kill the companion [...] in order to recognize and verify his presence',⁴⁸ but in that killing the individual self is also recognised and verified.

Yet for Macpherson this reprieve, occasioned by the shooting of the invader, is only momentary and even illusory. In the novel's final pages Hugh kills another man and Terry is herself killed; neither death softens the threat of disaster, but indeed only make it more apparent. The second man's death is different from the first because he is not an invader, but another escapee like the protagonists. In his death Hugh and Terry realise that they are now part of the disaster they have been trying to avoid. When the disaster is close, 'No man was safe, no man had friends, no man helped another, every man's hand was ready to strike'.⁴⁹ In this unnamed man's death, Hugh and Terry become complicit in the disaster. The encounter with another who is like them, and to whom they become the threat of disaster, demonstrates that Hugh and Terry have accepted the very disaster they seek to avoid, and that they actualise its threat. Indeed, one of the novel's most remarkable elements is that the reader comes to realise that Hugh and Terry never, in fact, escaped the disaster. The community they are so reluctant to leave is almost unmentioned; the nature so eloquently evoked in the novel's early descriptions of peat-cutting and deer-stalking is quickly revealed as hostile and unforgiving. Hugh and Terry are alienated from their former lives even as they attempt to preserve them.

The protagonists' inability to escape from the disaster is revealed in the way they mark time. Blanchot argues that the disaster does not ultimately lie in external threats, such as bombs or technology, but in 'our refusal to see the change of the epoch and to consider the sense of this turning'.⁵⁰ In *Wild Harbour*, it is similarly revealed that the danger has come not from the invaders, from the distant guns and fires, so much as from the loss of time and memory. Early in the

novel, Hugh writes that every significant event loses its significance as soon as it occurs:

It was strange, but as I tried to recall the past which was so near in point of days, I found that the past, distant and near, was faint and scarcely to be recalled. [...] These old events seemed like things I had been told, and heard with a vagrant mind.⁵¹

Shortly after this realisation, Terry attempts to ground herself in time, writing on the wall of the cave an exact date – April 7, 1944 – and a deep ‘I’.⁵² The mark to make for each day is both a roman numeral and also the ‘I’ itself; significantly, this method of timekeeping is never mentioned again. Instead, as the threat intensifies, the journal loses its hold on time. The final two entries, detailing Terry’s death, are titled first ‘Night’ and then have no title at all. The loss of the individual coincides with the loss of time: both externally and internally realised, the disaster exists outside of time, and disallows individual and communal self-knowledge.

At the moment of death, all of the disaster is made known, even as it remains unknowable. The disaster destroys the individual. It makes time and nature and writing all impossible; it removes all causality. As Hugh writes:

Terry is dead. When I see it there – Terry is dead. Why do I keep on writing for none to read, rending my heart to write *Terry is dead*. No, no, this is the pencil she gave me, nothing’s changed, all’s the same, this is our cave, our home. These walls that shelter us – I strike my hands on the rock. It’s rock, this is her pencil, speak to me, Terry. Terry is dead. She won’t speak, she’s dead. What’s dead, a word, a sound, a thing of no account? Dead, dead, dead. Waken, blind fool, din death to

crack the frozen air until your ears hear and
 your mind knows and your heart believes
 Terry is dead.⁵³

Hugh's grief here has little to do with the aestheticised sorrow John Grant embraces in *Shepherds' Calendar*. In the constant, meaningless, ungraspable repetitions of 'Terry is dead', neither writing, nor appeal to the self, nor appeal to the world can comprehend the disaster. The disaster, even when it is briefly and personally instantiated, remains wholly foreign. This depiction of the disaster as simultaneously intensely close and always external makes *Wild Harbour* Macpherson's most successful engagement with apocalyptic writing. In opposition to his previous novels, the disaster here cannot be localised to the individual acts of violence and death; instead, it is something always immanent and unknowable. This is an immensely nuanced and complex reading of the disaster, and one that deserves to be considered alongside similar twentieth-century accounts of the 'disastrous history of our time', ranging from Lawrence to Camus and Celine.

Indeed, *Wild Harbour* often reads as a distillation of the themes Lawrence addresses in *Kangaroo*, notably in the chapter 'The Nightmare'. Richard Lovat Somers and his wife Harriet travel to Australia because they believe that, in Europe at least, 'everything was done for, played out, finished',⁵⁴ but find that the sense of disaster – a term Lawrence uses throughout the novel – is inescapable. Somers loses his faith in 'himself, in mankind, in the destiny of mankind [...] [i]n Providence, in Almighty God', while the Australians – who are arguably only an external representation of Somers' internal state – have only 'a dull, rock-bottom belief in obstinately not caring, not caring about anything'.⁵⁵ *Wild Harbour* and *Kangaroo* differ in the original causes of fear: while war is at the root of the disaster for both couples, the Somerses are made afraid by 'the black animosity of authority',⁵⁶ while Hugh and Terry fear lawlessness itself. Yet what unites the two novels is the sense

that the disaster lies not in external events, but in a loss of individuality. Lawrence summarises the war as: 'Practically every man being caught away from himself'.⁵⁷ The war makes readily apparent what, as he argues in *Apocalypse*, has been the case all along: people 'are only fragmentary beings, incapable of whole individuality' whose motto is: 'we have nothing and therefore nobody shall have anything!'⁵⁸ Richard Somers discovers his agency only in order to lose it. *Kangaroo* neatly summarises what Leavis sees as the theme of Lawrence's arguably greater novels, the 'paradox of a continuity that is at the same time discontinuity: lives are separate, but life is continuous'.⁵⁹ The disaster, for Lawrence, comes in the self's recognition that he cannot exist separately, but is always already part of the immediate social sphere.

Similarly, in *Wild Harbour* Hugh and Terry find that their lives are always lived in relation to larger social concerns: 'all our work, all our home-making in the cave, all our happiness on this day of June, though it was sweet, did not divide us from our human fellows nor obliterate their woe'.⁶⁰ The couples in both novels are forced to leave their traditional, town-based communities. Both continually try to flee to more remote or wild places, where they can develop their selfhood, only to find that the disaster is present in the wild as well as in the town, in solitude as well as in crowds. Yet even as both couples strive to cope with the loss of a defined community, they are unable to emerge fully as individuals. For both novelists, the disaster is revealed in the simultaneous loss of community and individuality. Disaster cannot be localised to the Cornwall or Highland townships where the couples begin, nor can it be tied to their successes or failures as individuals, to their relationships, to nature or to culture. Instead, as in Blanchot, the disaster threatens because it is 'that which is most separate'.⁶¹ Both novels reveal a world that has been unmade. As Andrew Radford writes, if *Kangaroo* seems 'piecemeal, perverse and uneven', this is because for Lawrence 'the conditions which made conventional novel writing possible no longer existed'.⁶²

Wild Harbour and *Kangaroo* are attempts to write at the limits of writing itself. That Macpherson is more consistently successful in this endeavour than Lawrence begins to suggest *Wild Harbour*'s continued importance in an account of the use of narratives of the disaster and apocalypse in twentieth-century fiction.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, given *Wild Harbour*'s consistent statement that writing, even if necessary, is also impossible, Macpherson did not publish another novel in the last eight years of his life. In addition to an unfinished novel, *Rebels in Homespun*, he also is credited with co-authoring the novel *Letters from a Highland Township* with his wife Elizabeth. The latter novel consists primarily of letters from new resident in the Highland town of Strathmazeran, described as a 'darling but *astonishing* place'.⁶³ The novel presents a unified community that nullifies the threat of external disaster. George Lockhart writes at the novel's end that: 'We have been happy. Our lives have been full, are lines are cast in pleasant places, beside the still waters'.⁶⁴ While the tonal shift between *Wild Harbour* and *Letters from a Highland Township* has led Douglas F. Young to argue that the latter is primarily the work of Elizabeth Macpherson,⁶⁵ it also seems likely that the novel's retreat to an impossibly idealised Scotland originates from *Wild Harbour*'s dismissal of writing. If Macpherson has shown that the disaster cannot be written, perhaps all that writing can ultimately do is to depict a fantasy world where threat is unknown.

Ian Macpherson's novels are ultimately uneven, both in the quality of writing and the consistency of perspective, but deserve far more critical attention than they have hitherto received. While *Letters from a Highland Township* and *Pride in the Valley* evoke an idyllic, historical perspective, *Shepherds' Calendar* and *Wild Harbour* fully engage with the disaster. In the latter novel Macpherson depicts a world where communities and individuals are both subject to an indefinable threat that defies writing. *Wild Harbour*'s success in overturning the reader's preconceptions, and in

revealing a world where nothing is stable and all foundations have been removed, make it a notable contribution to twentieth-century Anglophone literature. Like that of Lawrence, the arc of Macpherson's career moves from early anti-pastoral work to late apocalyptic writings. Unlike Lawrence, however, Macpherson rarely couches his work in a personal philosophy. Instead, his best writings engage directly with the disaster and attempt to reveal what must always remain unknown. The bravery and force of these writings demonstrate that Macpherson is a novelist who must be acknowledged not only within the context of the Scottish renaissance, but in further discussions of twentieth-century engagements with apocalypse and disaster.

Notes

¹ See, for example, Roderick Watson's *The Literature of Scotland* (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1984), as well as John Burns's introduction to the Canongate edition of *Wild Harbour*, Isobel Murray's introduction to the Paul Harris edition of *Shepherds' Calendar* and Douglas F. Young's study of Macpherson, *Highland Search: The Life and Novels of Ian Macpherson* (Kinloss, Moray: Librario, 2002).

² Kurt Wittig, *The Scottish Tradition in Literature* (Edinburgh and London: Oliver and Boyd, 1958); J.M. Reid, *Modern Scottish Literature* (Edinburgh: Saltire Society, 1945); Maurice Lindsay, *History of Scottish Literature* (London: Hale, 1977); Francis Russell Hart, *The Scottish Novel: A Critical Survey* (London: John Murray, 1978); Cairns Craig (ed), *The History of Scottish Literature Volume 4: Twentieth Century* (Aberdeen: Aberdeen University Press, 1987).

³ Robert Baker, *The Extravagant: Crossings of Modern Poetry and Modern Philosophy* (Notre Dame: University of Notre Dame Press, 2005), p. 18.

⁴ Frank Kermode, *The Sense of an Ending: Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (Oxford and New York: Oxford University Press, 2000) p. 112.

⁵ Kevin Hart, *The Dark Gaze: Maurice Blanchot and the Sacred* (Chicago and London: University of Chicago Press, 2004), p. 214.

⁶ Hart, *Dark Gaze*, p. 120. Italics in original.

⁷ Graham Cuthbert, 'Ian Macpherson: A Neglected Pastoral Novelist', *The Weekend Scotsman* (19 January 1980), p. 4.

⁸ Robert Crawford, *Scotland's Books: The Penguin History of Scottish Literature* (London: Penguin Books, 2007), p. 598.

⁹ Raymond Williams, *The Country and the City* (1973, St Albans: Paladin, 1975), pp. 25-26.

¹⁰ Edmund Spenser, *Shepherds Calendar: Containing Twelve Eclogues Proportionable to the Twelve Months*, ed. C.H. Herford (1579, London: Macmillan and Co., Ltd, 1907), p. 15.

¹¹ James Hogg, *The Shepherd's Calendar* (Edinburgh: William Blackwood, 1829), Vol. I, p. 211.

¹² Cairns Craig, *The Modern Scottish Novel: Narrative and the National Imagination* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 1999), p. 14.

¹³ George Douglas Brown, *The House with the Green Shutters* (1901, Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 2005), p. 33.

¹⁴ Brown, *House*, p. 243.

- ¹⁵ Ian Macpherson, *Shepherds' Calendar*, int. Isobel Murray (1931, Edinburgh: Paul Harris Publishing, 1983), p. 11.
- ¹⁶ Raymond Williams, *Culture and Society: Coleridge to Orwell* (1958, London: Hogarth Press, 1987), p. 205.
- ¹⁷ F.R. Leavis, *D.H. Lawrence: Novelist* (1955, London: Chatto and Windus, 1967), p. 19.
- ¹⁸ D.H. Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers* (1913, Harmondsworth: Penguin Books, 1965), p. 366.
- ¹⁹ Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, p. 50.
- ²⁰ Marshall Berman, *All That Is Solid Melts Into Air: The Experience of Modernity* (London and New York: Verso, 1983), p. 30.
- ²¹ Lawrence, *Sons and Lovers*, p. 510.
- ²² Macpherson, *Shepherds' Calendar*, p. 26.
- ²³ Williams, *Country and the City*, p. 325.
- ²⁴ Macpherson, *Shepherds' Calendar*, p. 73.
- ²⁵ Macpherson, *Shepherds' Calendar*, p. 201, p. 196.
- ²⁶ Macpherson, *Shepherds' Calendar*, pp. 264-265.
- ²⁷ Maurice Blanchot, *The Writing of the Disaster*, new edition, trans. Ann Smock (1980, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1995), pp. 5-6.
- ²⁸ Ian Macpherson, *Land of Our Fathers* (London: Jonathan Cape, 1933), p. 11.
- ²⁹ Macpherson, *Land of Our Fathers*, p. 46.
- ³⁰ Ian Macpherson, *Pride in the Valley* (London: Methuen & Co., Ltd, 1936), p. 216.
- ³¹ Maurice Blanchot, *The Space of Literature*, trans. Ann Smock (1955, Lincoln and London: University of Nebraska Press, 1989), p. 30.
- ³² Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, p. 11.
- ³³ Macpherson, *Land of Our Fathers*, p. 283.
- ³⁴ Ian Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, int. John Burns (1936, Edinburgh: Canongate Classics, 1989), p. 2.
- ³⁵ Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, p. 99.
- ³⁶ Robert Louis Stevenson, *Kidnapped*, ed. Donald McFarlan (1886, London: Penguin Classics, 1994), p. 163.
- ³⁷ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 75.
- ³⁸ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, pp. 18-19.

- ³⁹ Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, p. 40.
- ⁴⁰ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 81.
- ⁴¹ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 81.
- ⁴² Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 84.
- ⁴³ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 94.
- ⁴⁴ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 135.
- ⁴⁵ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 139.
- ⁴⁶ Maurice Blanchot, *The Infinite Conversation*, trans. Susan Hanson (1969, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 183.
- ⁴⁷ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, pp. 148-149. Italics in original.
- ⁴⁸ Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, p. 183.
- ⁴⁹ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 168.
- ⁵⁰ Blanchot, *Infinite Conversation*, p. 270.
- ⁵¹ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 6.
- ⁵² Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 28. In the text, this 'I' is so large that it requires three lines to itself.
- ⁵³ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 173.
- ⁵⁴ D.H. Lawrence, *Kangaroo* (1923, London: William Heinemann Ltd, 1960), p. 8.
- ⁵⁵ Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 155, p. 59.
- ⁵⁶ Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 245.
- ⁵⁷ Lawrence, *Kangaroo*, p. 216.
- ⁵⁸ D.H. Lawrence, *Apocalypse and the Writings on Revelation*, ed. Mara Kalnins (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1980), p. 145.
- ⁵⁹ Leavis, *D.H. Lawrence*, p. 121.
- ⁶⁰ Macpherson, *Wild Harbour*, p. 70.
- ⁶¹ Blanchot, *Writing of the Disaster*, p. 1.
- ⁶² Andrew Radford, 'Strange Gods beneath the Post-War Rubble in *Kangaroo*', *D.H. Lawrence Review* 31.1 (2002), pp. 51-65, p. 53.
- ⁶³ Elizabeth Macpherson and Ian Macpherson. *Letters from a Highland Township* (Edinburgh and London: W & R Chambers, Ltd., 1939), p. 14. Italics in original.
- ⁶⁴ Macpherson and Macpherson, *Letters from a Highland Township*, p. 238.
- ⁶⁵ Young, *Highland Search*, p. 68.